# The legitimization and professionalization of esports: an analysis of the 2015 and 2019 Dota 2 Internationals

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**Abstract**

Esports is a phenomenon that has risen to prominence relatively recently, and a phenomenon with some inherent instability to it, with games played as esports rising and falling in prominence quickly. Despite this instability – or perhaps because of it – most of these games seek professionalization and legitimacy, with a few managing to become stable esports events and games, *League of Legends*, *Counter-Strike:Global Offensive* and *Dota 2* all being examples of successful esports games that are mostly stable. The latter's annual championship tournament the *International* held each Autumn since 2011 – with the exception of 2020 where COVID-19 forced mass events to postpone or cancel globally – is an example of a stable esports event, and one that has a predictable pattern of growth from year to year, and has been consistently one of the largest esports events in the world each year it has been held, breaking the record for highest prize pool every year. In this thesis the ways through which the International as a livestreamed event interacts with professionalization and legitimization is examined through looking into two of the Internationals, the fifth from 2015, and the ninth one from 2019 to see how an esports event evolves as it goes through these processes.

**Abstrakti**

E-urheilusta on tullut merkittävä ilmiö suhteellisen vähän aikaa sitten, mitä ei ole auttanut ilmiön epävakaus. Yksittäiset pelit ja tapahtumat voivat kaatua todella nopeasti, mutta siitä huolimatta – tai sen takia – nämä pyrkivät käyttämään monenlaisia keinoja sekä ammattimaistuakseen että legitimoidakseen itsensä. On joitakin pelejä ja tapahtumia, jotka ovat tässä myös onnistuneet, *League of Legends, Counter-Strike:Global Offensive* ja *Dota 2* ovat esimerkkejä peleistä joiden asema e-urheilun maailmassa on melko vakaa. Jälkimmäisimmän *International*-tapahtuma on esimerkki suuresta vuotuisesta tapahtumasta, joka on pysynyt vakaana vuodesta toiseen ensimmäisestä vuonna 2011 pidetystä Internationalista lähtien, lukuun ottamatta vuotta 2020 jolloin Internationalia ei järjestetty koronaviruksen takia. Tapahtuman kasvu vuodesta toiseen on nykyään ennalta-arvattava, mukaan lukien se, että jokainen International on rikkonut e-urheilun suurimpien palkintojen ennätyksen joka vuotena jona se on pidetty. Tämän tutkielman tavoite on tutkia miten ammattimaistuminen ja legitimisoituminen näkyvät vuoden 2015 ja 2019 Internationaleissa, ja miten e-urheilu tapahtuma kehittyy läpikäydessään näitä prosesseja.

# 1. Introduction

Like everything in the modern world, esports have also faced serious difficulties due to the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic that started in 2020, and it has affected this thesis as well. When I begun writing the thesis, neither I or anyone else had any idea that the world would essentially grind to a halt for more than a year by now, albeit at least now the vaccinations have begun, and there is hope that the pandemic will end. It has felt strange writing about esports tournaments, with packed in crowds of tens of thousands during a time when all such events are still on hold, and nobody knows exactly when mass gatherings return to our lives. But that is what I have been writing about, the evolution of one esports event from year 2015 to the year 2019 – Dota 2's the International, a grand world championship tournament where the best players in Dota 2 from around the globe gather around once a year to battle for the biggest prize pool in esports, that is notably funded by the efforts of the fans of the game and the esport.

In 2012 T.L. Taylor published a book called “Raising the Stakes – e-sports and the professionalization of computer gaming”, and that book is one of the most comprehensive academic inquiries into the realm of esports, and specifically into how the phenomenon transformed from a hobby into something else through professionalization. Or to be precise, how esports was going through professionalization – in the book's conclusion Taylor states people in the esports scene could be divided into enthusiastic amateurs, those participating in serious leisure, and those acting in a professional capacity within the space. What I am interested in is how has professionalization and legitimization in esports progressed, and how does it show in modern successful esports, and so I have looked at the evolution of one specific event, one that has proven it has enough staying power to remain a part of the esports ecosystem for a decade at the time of writing. *The International*, the annual culmination of the competitive scene of Dota 2, is the event I chose to look at – it is a well established event, having started in 2011, both stable and evolving, with an event every Autumn ever since, except for 2020 where COVID-19 made international mass gatherings an impossibility. The two Internationals examined are the event in 2015 and the event in 2019, giving us a look into the fifth and ninth year of Internationals.

The first third of this thesis goes over background on esports, attempts at seeking legitimacy by various parties in the larger esports scene, academic research on esports with a focus on Taylor's book, and finally a look into the background of Dota 2 itself. After the background is established, I analyze both Internationals, with the analysis divided into two – first we look at 2015, then into 2019, with the first part of the analysis focusing on how the fifth International's various aspects show legitimization and professionalization, and the look into the ninth focusing more on the changes from one event to the next, after which is the final discussion on the findings.

# 2. Background on esports

## 2.1. Basic facts about esports

So what makes an esport? Just because a game has online multiplayer does not mean that it is an esport, it needs more than that. There are other comparisons as well that one can make between traditional sports, and esports: both have teams that are sponsored by various companies and organizations, there are fans of individual teams and players, rivalries between fans of competing teams, flashy moments during matches that make the "crowd go wild" as sports announcers sometimes proclaim and so on. There is a very good reason esports are named what they are – although they are vastly different in some other aspects. Most esport matches are not played in front of a live audience, they are still usually streamed live through a livestreaming platform, and the one used by most esports organizations is Twitch (www.twitch.com). Twitch is at the moment the most popular platform for live streamed gaming content, and it has had something close to a monopoly the last few years, although serious competitors have begun to appear – Youtube and Facebook with its own streaming system are the current primary competitors. However, it says something of the volatility of the market that when I originally wrote this part in early 2020, there was a streaming platform called Mixer that I referred to as one of the competitors of Twitch – the platform shutdown in June 2020. Still, some esports organizations choose to stream their games exclusively on competing platforms, with Activision-Blizzard announcing in early 2020 all their

esports would be streamed exclusively on Youtube, including Overwatch League.

While currently esports companies seem to have accepted that livestreaming services are where their primary audience watches esports competitions, being on television is still something of a prestigious goal. Some major esports competitions have their matches shown on television, but it varies game by game and tournament to tournament whether or not they are broadcasted on television. Overwatch League, for instance, was broadcasted on ABC, ESPN2 and Disney XD (Variety, 7.2. 2019), albeit in a limited fashion on both ABC and ESPN. For most esports, online streaming is their primary broadcasting method, but as was the case with Overwatch League which is no longer on TV, some do attempt to entrench themselves in television broadcasting as well.

Like regular sports, esports matches also have live commentary provided by expert analysts – such as former professional players – and colour commentators, also known as “shoutcasters”. The quality of the commentary varies greatly from hobbyists to veteran professionals, but as esports have grown older, the pool of experienced casters has slowly grown. Most casters primarily cast matches from a specific game, as each game is fairly different, and someone who knows how to cast Dota 2 matches might not know how to cast League of Legends matches, for instance. In this, esports are similar to sports – a commentator for snooker is unlikely to know how to properly commentate soccer. Still, it should be noted that there are casters who cast multiple games, and host events for different games, such as Paul Chaloner who has hosted anything from FPS-games to MOBAs, but most casters remain within specific genres of games, whether that's MOBAs or FPS-games, depending on how specialized the casters are – casters that provide expert analysis tend to be locked into one game or genre, and casters that provide enthusiasism and hype are more able to swap from game to game (Sell, 2015). There are certain similarities to traditional sports in the training schedules of professional players as well: people who play videogames on a professional level need to train constantly just as professional players in traditional sports need to, and the training schedules can be incredibly harsh at times (Dal Young Jin, 2010). In contrast, the fact is that esports are not a very physical activity when compared to real sports – although there can be esports related injuries as well, such as damaged wrists, carpal tunnel syndrome and so on. North American Dota 2 player Clinton ‘Fear’ Loomis is an excellent example, as he had to take a break from competitive Dota 2 in 2014 to heal his tennis elbow – at the time, Loomis referred to the injury as a “mouse elbow” in his tweet announcing the break, referencing the fact that the injury

was due to a different sort of strain on the elbow than usually is the case with tennis elbow. There is a common belief in esports as well, that after a certain age one cannot play on a professional level due to the slowing of reflexes, but this age comes far earlier than the retirement age for players of most traditional sports – in 2017 ESPN investigated the average age of esports players when compared to traditional professional sports, and each of the traditional sports examined had a higher average player age than even the esport with the highest average (www.espn.com, 17.9.2017). While there are similarities between sports and esports, there are rather large differences as well.

Sports stars interact with the fans in rather limited ways, being essentially celebrities when it comes to the biggest sports, but there are a lot more ways for fans of esports to interact with their favourite pro players. Perhaps the biggest difference in this is the fact that it is entirely possible for an esports fans to play with the professional players in their favourite games – most of the games played as esports have some sort of public matchmaking, where one can play with random people from all over the world, and while the chance is small, one might end up playing with the professional players of that game. Fans may also be able to watch their favourite players stream their casual games live on Twitch, as many professional gamers of several individual games often do – in some extreme examples, such as Apex Legends competitive scene, professional players may even stream their play in tournaments, although Apex Legends-scene is an outlier in this behaviour, in general competitive gameplay is only shown through the official broadcast of the event in question. While there might be some special events where fans can play with big sports stars, they are rare occasions. Compare this to matchmaking in online multiplayer games where a skilled regular player could randomly be matched up with a pro player and either face him as an opponent or have him as an ally on his team. It is even possible to have more than one professional player on each of the two teams, although the games where situations like that happen tend to only happen at the highest tiers of matchmaking. The fans and stars are fairly close when it comes to esports, and that might be one reason esports sponsorships seem so appealing to companies.

There is a fair amount of money in esports, and total revenue per year has grown to over a billion a year by now, and it is steadily increasing each year (Newzoo, 2019). However, it is very likely the true number is even higher – Newzoo, a marketing firm specializing in the game industry, does not

count ingame revenue in its totals, and as games such as Dota 2 with its International Compendium shows, these can bring in hundreds of millions of dollars as well, a quarter of the cost of each International Compendium is added to the International prize pool, and in 2019 the number was 34,3 million dollars minus the initial 1,6 million Valve provides as the base prize pool – so before deducting taxes and expenses, Valve gained almost 100 million dollars from ingame revenue. Sponsors come to the scene hoping to advertise their products, game companies who make the games that are played competitively use esports as a way to get more revenue out of their games, and the professional players hope to make money doing what they love. And it is clear that esports are fairly lucrative for the business world as well. In 2015, Newzoo published a market research report where they estimated that the revenues from esports would triple in 2017 (Newzoo, 2015), although it has to be said their expectations did not quite come true – in 2017, revenue had grown to 696 million dollars, a little over double that of 2015's 325 million (Newzoo, 2017). The 2015 report also stated that at the time only 40% of esports spectators have played the esport-games they spectate, and at least some companies in the industry are aware of this – and considering that there were almost 200 million people watching esports in 2014 (Newzoo, 2015), acknowledging the market is profitable. In 2019, the total esports audience had grown to 454 million viewers, out of which 201 million were marked as esports enthusiasts (Newzoo, 2019).

### 2.1.1 Defining esports

Esports is not something that can be easily defined, partially thanks to how the phenomenon is ever changing, and how different people define esports varies greatly as well. *The Oxford Dictionary* definition could serve us as a place to start, giving a sort of textbook definition for us:

> *A multiplayer video game played competitively for spectators, typically by professional gamers.*

The definition is lacking, but it gives us some basic facts about what esports are. Esports are games played professionally by avid gamers in a competitive fashion, in a way that can be spectated by others. Both the basic facts of esports being competitive gaming, and spectator entertainment are present in the definition, although the definition perhaps narrows it a bit too much by referring to esports as merely the games that have the two defining features. I would argue that 'esports'

should currently refer to the entire structure of esports, not just to the games. So the definition should also account for the organizations and companies involved in esports in various roles, from sponsorships to organizing the tournaments where esports are played, and that seems to be where academia is finding consensus (Adams, Devia-Allen, Moore. 2019).

The term 'esports' is somewhat misleading, as it invokes the imagery of regular sports too much. There are some shared features, but there are also some major differences as well, and the term complicates what esports actually means. The best example of this is how 'sports' as a term both refers to a group of school kids playing football during recess, as well as to a major international hockey tournament. Sports are being played in both cases. However, with esports it does not work this way: playing a multiplayer videogame against your friends is not considered esports, while professional players playing the exact same game in an international tournament are participating in esports. The key here might be that playing esports is considered a professional activity, and therefore casual play of games also played at professional level should not be considered as esports – because esports and sports are not identical. Technically, *competitive gaming* or a similar term would be more accurate, but 'esports' is what the term has stabilized as. Sports and esports have major similarities, but major differences as well.

The question is, where do you draw the line? When does playing games become an esport? Playing games for entertainment in a competitive setting is a definition that would apply to two popular livestreamers playing against each other for a hundred dollar bet while livestreaming the matches, but should that count as esports?

So with all this in mind, it is time to give out a definition of esports used in this thesis:

> *Esports is the cultural phenomenon of professional playing of videogames for sport and entertainment in a competitive setting for an audience*

This definition refers to all aspects of the professional gaming phenomenon, both the games and their players as well as the surrounding structures of competitive gaming as entertainment, including the game developers, the gaming tournaments and the companies sponsoring professional players or tournaments. It also refers to specifically *professional playing*, as in gaming

as a profession – so esports players who at least try to use their career in esports as their main form of income, and thus the competitive setting has to be more than just two people playing for a bet in front of an audience. The definition is not perfect, it still does not differentiate enough between gaming streamers and esports players, as with this definition one could argue that, for example, a livestreamer who primarily streams gameplay of himself trying to reach the top rank of a game's ingame ranking system is creating esports content. He is not, but his actions would mostly fall within the definition – he is streaming his own gameplay as his primary income, playing professionally as it were, he is doing it in a competitive setting arguably, as even if the quality of the competition is lower than in esports competitions, all others participating in the ranked gamemodes are also trying to reach as high a rank as they can, and he is of course playing for entertainment and sport – he is playing for a live audience, and competing against others. For the purposes of this thesis, I will use this definition as there is no one, clear, universally agreed upon definition outside of the dictionary definition, but it should be noted the definition has its flaws. One final note on this subject, *esports* is the general term, but this does not mean each esport works identically, just like one should not expect each traditional sport to work identically. There are similarities between different esports in presentation, how they are shown to audiences and et cetera, but each individual game played as an esport tends to have its own individual quirks in how it works.

## 2.2. Esports research

There are some issues when it comes to examining research pertaining to esports currently, due to a couple of different reasons that affect the entirety of the field. One of the reasons is rather simple; the standardization of the term is still new. Even the term esports is not used by all researchers, some talk about e-sports, some spell it eSports, and some use different terms entirely, such as competitive gaming, although ever since official AP style was established as “esports” in 2017, other ways of spelling it have become rarer in academic texts, but the other spellings can still be found. It is also possible to find studies that use the term ”e-sports” or ”esports”, but that mean something completely different to what is examined in this thesis. For instance, in 2012 professor Andreas Hebbel-Seeger published an article in the “International Journal of Sports Marketing &

Sponsorship" titled "The relationship between real sports and digital adaptation in e-sport gaming", which does not refer to esports as it is referred to in this thesis, but instead refers to videogame adaptations of traditional sports. The article was peer reviewed as well, and yet none involved realized that their understanding of the term "e-sport" was wrong; the article was about digital adaptations of traditional sports and how they worked, which they referred to as "electronic sports" or "e-sports", which differs greatly from the actual definition of the term. There are academics that have wildly varying opinions on the legitimacy of esports and of how it should relate to sports, especially among sports academics, some very vehemently disagree with esports being sports (Parry, 2019), some are still trying to decide whether or not they are (Thiel&John, 2018, Bowman&Cranmer, 2019) and some examine the reasons why esports could be a sport, and what it would mean (Llorens, 2017).

In addition to disagreement on terminology, another is that there simply is not that much research on esports – and much of the research that exists is about Korea's esports scene, which differs from the more modern esports scenes into which Dota 2 and the Internationals belong to. There are some individual studies into the global esports scene as well – T. L. Taylor's "Raising the stakes: The professionalization of e-sports" being the most comprehensive study so far – but not many. Still, it is likely that the definitive study to esports is yet to come, esports as a phenomenon has only started to become a globally relevant phenomenon instead of something confined to South Korea and niche sub-cultures elsewhere. Considering the massive scale of the largest esports events, and the general growth of the phenomenon in recent years, it is fairly likely the preliminary work for the first major wave of esports research is underway. Related issue is the fact that research in the field can get outdated so quickly, some information in Dal Young Jin's "Korea's Online Gaming Empire", published in 2010, is already outdated for example – Jin remarks that the most amount of money a top Korean esports player can expect is around 200 000 dollars a year (82). A small amount when compared to what top Dota 2 players can earn at the moment, the winners of the International all essentially became millionaires just from the winnings alone, without even taking into account their salaries. Esports research is a field where "facts" about the scene can be outdated rather suddenly, even with as much stabilization and professionalization as the scene is trying to go through, entire teams, tournaments and organizers can disappear with little warning (Taylor, 228) – and an excellent example of that is when Blizzard cancelled its entire *Heroes of the Storm* esports scene suddenly in late 2018, instantly ending the careers of every one

of the professional players of Heroes of the Storm (Variety, 14.12.2018). Still, the system has stabilized enough that, for example, esports casters and hosts can now rely on norms established by earlier esports talents, instead of relying on lessons learned from traditional sports casters (Sell, 2015).

Due to the limited amount of research on esports available currently, it is easier to say where there are no major gaps in research than it is to say where there are not. Most earlier studies at the very least mention traditional sports, for instance. Dal Young Jin, for example, talks about the differences between sports and esports. While the book as a whole focuses more on the esports scene in Korea where it touches on the subject, Jin talks about how esports as a phenomenon is a new media phenomenon, with technological, cultural and economic aspects that greatly differ from traditional sports (60-64). Starcraft's esports scene is the one area of study where esports research is plentiful, but most sections of the overall esports phenomenon do not have much in the way of indepth research.

Esports audiences are a rapidly growing market, in 2015 it already produced more than 197 million dollars a year in revenue, and it has only grown since (Newzoo, 2015). Non-academic research often looks into the phenomenon precisely because of the money – Newzoo who gave that estimate are a marketing firm specializing in the games industry, for example. Other aspects of the economic side of esports study include looking into the salaries and work hours of professional players, Korean Starcraft-players for instance have harsh schedules of training and studying better tactics, the harshest ones used to have the players train for up to 16 hours a day (Dal Young Jin, 2010, pg. 84). There is not much detail of what happens behind the scenes in regards to esports as a business, at least in the Dota 2 esports scene, as both the players and the organizations prefer to keep their contracts confidential, although T.L. Taylor has an example contract of another scene's player in her book’s appendix.

Taylor's book is currently the most comprehensive piece of academic writing on esports, and it specifically focuses on how esports became a professionalized industry instead of a hobby or serious leisure, albeit she does note some in the esports scene still participate in it as serious leisure (Taylor, 246). Parts of it are already outdated, but Taylor herself acknowledges this:

> *So this is, with eyes wide open, as much a conscious claim of provisional saturation and documenting things where they are at now, as anything. It is my hope that other researchers' accounts of various aspects of the scene will help fill in gaps and broaden the story.* (29)

Taylor's intentions were partially to provide a starting point for academic discussion on esports (30), and a significant portion of the book is dedicated to the history of esports. The main focus of the book was on the professionalization of esports, how different organizations have become involved in esports, the growth of esports as a spectator sport, how esports tournaments and professional players have interacted, and generally speaking she examines how esports have stabilized into an industry. It should be noted that the book was written and published before the rise of Twitch into the dominant position it has today in the livestreaming market, so Taylor has little to say on the rise of the live streaming platforms in 2012, and the total prize money in tournaments held after the book's publication has risen dramatically – for contrast, Taylor mentions 25 000 dollars as an example from the high end of top prizes, while by 2015 there were several tournaments with total prize money being over one million dollars, and 2019's International is the current record holder with 34,3 million dollars in its prize pool, and some esports competitors such as Fortnite (2017) are starting to get close to those numbers as well, with *Fortnite World Cup Finals* in 2019 having a total prize pool of 30 million dollars, fully provided by Epic Games themselves. Despite how parts of the book are already outdated as it was published in 2012, Raising the Stakes is still the most comprehensive academic work on the subject of esports, with the vast majority of studies published since then being generally tighter in focus and smaller in scale. Taylor has also written in 2018 a book specifically on livestreaming and Twitch, "Watch Me Play" (2018), and esports' part in all that is also examined. Much of my analysis builds on Taylor's work, looking into how Dota 2's esports scene's professionalization can be seen from the evolution of its premiere esport event.

## 2.3. Different approaches to legitimization of esports

One can argue that esports are already either as legitimate as traditional sports – or about to be – as both entertainment and as a profession either as a professional player, caster or some other related career, something that is no longer just a niche hobby or a curious phenomenon that might

disappear overnight. If looking at only the viewer numbers, prize pools and the ever growing esports industry, it is clear that esports are a notable phenomenon. Millions of viewers watch as professional players play for millions of dollars in the biggest events, with there being usually one major world championship event a year for each major esports game. And in some countries esports already have an established status – South Korea is the obvious example, no other country has esports as such a big part of their culture. Many organizations and people operating in the esports-scene likely wish that the Western esports scene would become similar to the Korean one, the one where the most popular players are considered stars, and where there are popular TV-channels that have nothing but esports content.

Esports as mass entertainment is currently going through legitimization, and it has taken time for it to get to this point. There are comparisons to be made to early cinema here, with esports having gone through similar issues as it did. For example, early cinema was sometimes a part of variety theater to try and drum up interest in movies (Waltz, 2015). Similarly, esports have tried to mimic sports several times in their history, and the belief that being shown on television is a way to legitimization has been common in esports. Early esports organizations thought the way to legitimacy was to have the matches broadcasted on television, and organizations such as Major League Gaming focused on television productions as the primary means of broadcasting esports matches. The style of esports broadcasts has also been similar to sport broadcasts or television shows – sometimes to an extreme degree. Taylor mentions (Taylor, 215-217) in her book how one organization that broadcasted esports matches on television also had a studio audience watching the matches, but that the whole set up was a fake: the audience did seem to clap and cheer at the right points, but that is because they were told to do that whenever something special supposedly happened. Championship Gaming Series did not bother with getting an audience specifically interested in the games being played but used a false audience to build up excitement as they felt a cheering audience was necessary for a sports event. Esports are not the same as traditional sports, which has not stopped some organizations from treating them as such.

In fact, in recent times traditional sports have begun to influence esports and the organizations operating within the esports circles as more people have begun to pay attention to esports. For example, several NBA-teams and players have begun to sponsor esports teams and the game developer company Blizzard Entertainment specifically courted traditional sports moguls, such as

Robert Kraft for their Overwatch League (www.espn.com, 27.7.2018). A few of the major esports games, Overwatch and League of Legends have adapted the franchise system from sports, with leagues where various teams pay for slots to be in the league – with the price tag being in the millions - instead of the more chaotic systems of esports of the past, with qualifiers for individual events and leagues giving out slots through varying systems. The Overwatch League is the more extreme example of the two, with each franchised team being officially located in a specific city and with a specific name and logo, whereas in League of Legends the teams have more control over their own branding. They are examples of franchise leagues format of esports (George and Sherrick, 2019), whereas Dota 2 used to be primarily a tournament focused format, albeit in 2021 the competitive format of the Dota 2 scene has begun to transition into a relegation league-format.

International e-Sports Federation (IeSF) is a South Korea based organization that "makes an effort to promote e-Sports as a true sport beyond language, race and culture barriers." (ie-sf.com) "True sport" is the key term here, getting esports a status as official sports is one of the main goals of the organization. How they approach this is by doing things such as hosting esports world championships, where different national teams compete with each other in a variety of games, by trying to impose international standards on games played as esports, players, organizations and so on. IeSF tries to be something akin to FIFA, Olympic committee, or other traditional sports organizations, a large parent organization under which different national organizations work under. The problem is that even casual examination reveals that their methods have serious issues. Esports teams and players come from all over the world, with teams usually consisting of players from multiple nationalities. When looking at the teams at the Internationals for example, most teams had players from more than one nationality in them. Even the Chinese teams despite being most heavily based in one specific country, continue to have players from Malaysia and other nearby countries in their rosters. At the big annual event hosted by IeSF, their e-Sports World Championship, different national teams compete in a variety of esports games – and yet, this is a completely artificial setting, as the biggest teams in esports are usually not segregated by nationality. It is an attempt by IeSF to create something like the Olympics of esports, with mixed success.

IeSF's approach also has other issues with it as well, especially in the rules it has enforced on the

national organizations under it: in the July of 2014, a professional gaming tournament for the game Hearthstone was held in Finland by one of the national gaming organizations, SEUL (Suomen elektronisen urheilun liitto). The tournament was part of IeSF's global efforts, and as such it had to follow IeSF's rules, one of which was that it was a male only tournament, as at that point in time IeSF's tournaments were fully segregated to women only and men only. The men-only tournament caused serious international uproar, with even some major news outlets, such as the Guardian, reporting on the issue. Initially, IeSF defended their decision in a Facebook post: "The decision to divide male and female competitions was made in accordance with international sports authorities, as part of our effort to promote e-Sports as a legitimate sports" – quote taken from the Guardian online article (2.6.2014), as the original Facebook post by IeSF has since been edited. IeSF's statement also included references to how some chess leagues are segregated by gender, while ignoring the fact that the very highest levels of chess championships are not segregated by gender, and that some non-physical sports are not segregated by gender as well, as the Guardian article pointed out. IeSF later reconsidered their policies after the community uproar, and changed their official stance to make most of the tournaments organized according to their rules open for all, with the few exceptions being female only tournaments (ie-sf.org). IeSF's way of legitimizing e-sports is by trying to make the phenomena as much like traditional sports as possible, an approach that can have issues such as these.

While IeSF's methods are problematic, companies and people making their living from esports would find it helpful if esports were considered as sports, both legally and culturally. Riot Games, the developer of League of Legends, managed to get professional players of League of Legends athlete-status in the United States in 2013 (NBC News, 19.7.2013), specifically they were able to get professional players of League of Legends athlete visas. Professional players in most games played as esports have had serious issues with getting visas to attend international events, so getting professional players recognized as professional athletes was a huge victory for Riot Games, especially since they basically control their game's esports scene completely. Visa problems are likely to continue in the future as well, the administration of Donald Trump in the United States might have partially motivated Valve to hold events outside the United States due to the administrations general hostility towards immigrants, for example. Riot Games in general is an example of the developer being in full control of their game's esports scene. They organize the events, make sure their players' have salaries, negotiate with sponsors, and so on. Getting back to

the athlete visas, it is likely that the fact that Riot Games has such a tight organization around the League of Legends professional scene is what made it possible for their players to be recognized as athletes. In other games successful as esports, such as Dota 2, such united organizations are still rare.

Riot Games' approach towards the esports side of their game falls under the phenomena Taylor examines in her book, the professionalization of esports. While there are certain similarities with IeSF's approach towards legitimizing esports, there is not as much focus on trying to be a "true sport" with Riot Games and League of Legends. What the developer of League of Legends is doing is a top-down approach, with Riot Games controlling how the esports scene of its game develops, but they also recognize that esports cannot be approached identically to real sports. Sure, there is a league system in place, headed by Riot Games itself, from which the best teams face off annually in League of Legends world championships, the company makes the rules and regulations – which can be harsh at times – for its esports scene, but teams are not segregated by gender or nations, mixed teams are allowed even if there has only been one female professional player of League of Legends so far, and a team can have people from several different nations in it. The professional leagues are divided by regions, such as North America and Europe, but it is more of a practical issue: most matches are played online, and teams from different regions would have connection issues when playing with teams who are on the other side of the world. Although it must be mentioned that one specific region, South Korea, is based on just one nation and has historically had more success than the other regions.

Where League of Legends gets most of its spectators is similar to Dota 2's spectatorship, online services such as Twitch are where most of its spectators are. There is an assumption in place that esports are vastly different from traditional sports, which means that Riot Games and League of Legends are not constrained by trying to mimic sports organizations and traditional sports themselves. There is, however, an acknowledgement that trying to be as professional about esports as possible is an advantage, and that getting some sort of official recognition is useful – and like with IeSF, Riot Games holds a lot of power over how esports are played under their supervision, more than IeSF even, as Riot Games can balance their game more directly than IeSF can the games played at their events. IeSF also has the distinct problem that should a game developer not want their game to played at their events, there is very little stopping them from

sending a cease and desist to stop their game being part of any event, besides bad PR.

Many of the attempts at seeking legitimization have been about trying to attach esports to something more established than esports itself. Major League Championship used tv broadcasts and audiences not necessarily interested in esports and IeSF exemplifies the attempts at emulating traditional sports, serving also as an example of how emulating certain rules from traditional sports is not necessary in esports, such as segregating men and women. There are still certain advantages to this as shown by Riot Games, who managed to get athlete-status for their players, while not being constrained by rules and norms of traditional sports like IeSF chose with their old rules.

## 2.4. Dota 2 background

As can be inferred from the name, Dota 2 is a sequel to another game, Defense of the Ancients, which was commonly abbreviated to DotA. Or, to be precise, a sequel to a game modification – the original Defense of the Ancients was a special custom map created for Blizzard Entertainment's Warcraft 3, which gained enough popularity that eventually Valve hired the main developer of the custom map to develop a sequel to the custom map as an independent game (Gamasutra, 7.10. 2009). Dota 2 entered development, and eventually Valve announced Dota 2's first major tournament as a way of unveiling the game to the public (Valve, 1.8.2011), with many veterans of the small competitive scene of the original Defense of the Ancients participating at the event. The first International was held in 2011 at the Gamescom 2011 event in Cologne, Germany. At the time Dota 2 was still in closed beta, available only to a small number of people – the game was not even close to complete yet, and only a tiny minority of the eventual player base had beta access. As an event, the first International was not yet the mega event it is today, but it was already breaking records: the first International had the largest total amount of prize money in esports history, with the grand total being 1,6 million, out of which one million went to the winning team, which was Natus Vincere, an Ukrainian team with players from various East European countries. It also marked the point when Dota 2 stopped being a fully closed beta, with the non-disclosure agreements binding the beta testers being abolished (Gosugamers, 23.9.2011). This also opened the way for third party tournaments, the first major one being held in late October of 2011 already, as a part of Electronic Sports World Club 2011 (Liquipedia, 2011).

After the first International Dota 2's player base steadily grew, with Valve giving out beta keys to more and more new players, but the game and the community was still in its infancy when the second International was held in Seattle in 2012 (Neoseeker.com, 2012). It was much the same as the first International, its prize money being identical for instance, but it did mark the point at which the popularity of Dota 2 begun to grow rapidly, as Valve vastly increased the amount of beta keys available immediately after the International 2. It was a bigger, more professional event than the first one had been, with the main event lasting three days and being held at the Benaroya Hall in Seattle.

The year 2013 is when the event and the popularity of Dota 2 began their rapid growth, and the year when Dota 2 was officially released as a free to play game, with the official release date being 9.7. 2013. It was also the year that the International's total prize money begun to grow due to the introduction of the International Compendiums (Valve, 8.5.2013). International Compendiums in Dota 2 are small, virtual booklets about the International that the fans can buy, which also give them ingame cosmetic items for the different characters of Dota 2 that they can use while they play the game. 25 per cent of the sale price of each compendium go towards increasing the total prize money available in Dota 2, and Valve also introduced a series of stretch goals that the community could earn by increasing the prize pools. These included rewards such as special, unique ingame cosmetic items that would only be available as rewards for the compendium owners, ability to vote on which professional players would participate in a special show match and special taunts players could use with certain characters in Dota 2. This proved immensely popular, and the original total prize money of 1.6 million grew to 2.8 million thanks to the purchases of the compendium.

The introduction of the compendiums was the key factor in the Internationals' having the largest amounts of prize money in all of esports, as Valve has improved the International compendiums for each year. The stretch goals have grown, and what the compendium provides for its buyers has improved each year. Valve has so far provided the first 1.6 million of the prize money at each International, but all the rest of it have come from the fans of the game – in 2015 it was 18.3 million dollars, and in 2019 it had grown to 34.3 million dollars. Before 2015 Valve was mostly hands off when it came to the competitive scene of Dota 2, only organizing the International each

year, but late 2015 did mark a change in how Dota 2's esports scene works after Valve introduced the concept of Dota 2 Major Championships (Majors hereafter), several large tournaments held by Valve in addition to the Internationals (Valve, 24.5. 2015).

The Majors were the most significant update to the Dota ecosystem since the compendium, the original incarnation of Majors were four seasonal Majors, with the Summer Major being the International itself, and the other three being Fall, Winter and Spring Majors, with each having a 3 million dollar prize pool provided by Valve – in 2016-2017 season, there were only two Majors in addition to the International, but they remained otherwise the same. Each had a mix of invited teams and those who got through various regional qualifiers, and each Major also provided something else to aim for each year besides only the International – albeit the International still remained the primary goal of each team. Before the Majors Dota 2 had never had any sort of official year long league in the model of traditional sports, albeit a few third party organizers have attempted to create unofficial ones over the years with varying degrees of success, and as such the only way to get noticed for the International was by succeeding at the various third party tournaments. This either resulted in the team receiving a direct invite, or an invite to the International's qualifiers. The Majors were Valve's first attempt at creating some sort of seasonal year long system, but it was still ultimately fairly opaque – success in the Majors was a good indication that any team winning them would be invited to the International, but this was not guaranteed (Dotabuff, 25.6. 2016). In the first season with Majors, team OG won two of them and was invited to TI6, but team Secret who won one, was not directly invited and had to go through the qualifiers to play at TI6. Despite being the premiere events besides the International, they were not the only tournaments that mattered, but what exactly was Valve's criteria for direct invites was unclear. The first incarnation of Majors were not the perfect, but for two years they were the premium tournaments to attend alongside the International, up until 2017, when after TI7, Valve introduced the Dota Pro Circuit (Valve, 3.7.2017).

Just like the introduction of the Majors, the new Dota Pro Circuit was a significant change to how Dota 2 esports work. Its original incarnation was a system Valve used from late 2017 to 2020, with teams earning Dota Pro Circuit Points (DPC-points) by playing in various Majors now mostly organized by third party organizers as well as Minors, smaller tournaments also organized primarily by third party organizations, but with generally smaller prize pools. This is the system that was in

place in 2019, with most teams qualifying for the International through their DPC points, although there were also open and regional qualifiers through which a few more teams also got in. In 2021 the system was changed again, and while the DPC points remained, Minors were gone and replaced with Regional Leagues divided into Upper and Lower divisions where teams from each region play against each other to qualify for Majors where teams from each region meet, and teams earn DPC points based on their ranking both in the league and the Majors (Valve, 2020). This system has some similarities to Dota 2's competitors as league play is the standard in both *League of Legends* and *Overwatch*, but the leagues do still have means for non-established teams to enter – at the end of each league play period, two lowest ranked teams from the Lower division are eliminated, and they are replaced by two teams who qualify through open qualifiers, and the top two from the Lower Division replace bottom two from Upper Division who fall to the Lower Division. In 2020 the International was not held due to COVID-19, but at the time of writing Valve has announced that the International 10 will be held in Sweden in August (Valve, 12.5.2021).

Besides the evolving ruleset of Dota 2's esports ecosystem, there have been some other methods through which Valve and the community have expanded Dota 2's place in the world. In 2014, Valve introduced an esports documentary they had produced, *Free to Play* (2014), which followed three professional players and their experiences before and during the first International. The film was originally published for free online on 19th of March in 2014, through Valve's online storefront Steam as well as on Youtube. While this was the first attempt by Valve to produce a documentary, it would not be the last – in 2016 Valve introduced the *True Sight* series, a spiritual successor to Free to Play. At first it was essentially an online documentary series, following various teams for five episodes as they competed during the 2016-2017 season, with the first three episodes only available to those that had purchased the ingame item of “Fall 2016 Battle Pass” in Dota 2, but Valve later decided to publish the other episodes for free. The series was successful, but Valve still decided to change up the format in 2018 – instead of having an episodic series of following various teams throughout the year, they decided to refocus it on the grand finals of the International. In fact, in 2018 Valve did not publish any episodes, instead creating a more refined one hour documentary about the 2018 Grand Finals that was publicly shown in January of 2019. It was not the only change to the format – although the documentary would be made available for free on Youtube and Steam after its premiere, it also had a live premiere in Copenhagen, Denmark that was broadcasted live to an online audience. In addition to the documentary itself, the event

also had a QA with the winning team of the International 2018, and Valve also made available a special version of the documentary, with added commentary by these same winners. Valve kept the same format for 2019, and the True Sight-documentary regarding the International 2019 had a similar live and online premiere in January of 2020. In addition to documentaries, an anime based on Dota 2's world was released on Netflix, DOTA: Dragon's Blood (2021), whose first season was successful enough to merit an order of a second season, and it was also accompanied by Free to Play making its debut on Netflix. Lastly, Valve has released two additional games set in the fictional world of Dota 2, Artifact (2018) and Dota Underlords (2020), but neither game managed to achieve the popularity of the game from which they were spun off from.

### 2.4.1. Structure of a Dota 2 match

Dota 2 is a complex game, and its esports matches even more so and this thesis does not go into detail on how the game works, but a short explanation of the structure of a professional match and the basic gameplay is still needed, as some of the terminology of the game comes up several times in later sections of the analysis. Each professional match begins with the teams deciding on two things, who goes first in the pick and ban phase, and who plays on which side of the Dota 2 map, the Dire or the Radiant side – typically, this phase is not shown during livestreams. Then, it is time for a *pick and ban phase*, where each team bans a few of the available characters each with their own special abilities, then pick a few, then ban a few again, and this process repeats until both teams have chosen five unique *heroes*, the ingame characters. Then, the game truly begins, with each team starting on their own side of the Dota 2 map, that is divided into the aforementioned Radiant and Dire sides, with Radiant on the bottom side, and Dire on the upper side. The two halves of the map are roughly mirrored – many small details differ so they are not entirely symmetrical, but all major features are present on each side of the map on roughly the same spots. Both teams goal is the destruction of the enemy *ancient*, which is located in the middle of each base, a giant crystal protected by several layers of defenses that each team has to crack through before it can be destroyed, most prominently tier 1, 2, 3 and 4 *towers* and *barracks,* the former of which spawns AI controlled *creeps* that try to attack the defenses of the enemy side. The game ends in a victory for the team who destroyed their enemies' ancient – alternatively, the enemy team may surrender before this happens if it seems like the advantage the enemy team has is too strong. Through the duration of the game each hero played by the players accumulates

experience and gold that they use to improve their character. Game length varies greatly in pro matches, but one can expect an average match to last 30-40 minutes, plus some time dedicated to the pick and ban phase at the start of each match. At the International, matches are played either as best of one, best of three or best of three matches, with the majority being best of three matches, and only the Grand Final being a best of five.

## 3. Material

All of the material in the first part of the analysis was part of the International 5 live streams, with the majority of it coming from the English main stream, but the first hour of the newcomer stream on the first day of the International was also looked at. It should be noted that the newcomer stream's VODs are only available as Twitch VODs, which are of generally poorer video quality than the Youtube VODS of the main stream. Most of the material is roughly three hours of video from the first two days of the International, taken from the Youtube VODs of the event. The segments analysed are from the start of the actual broadcast and skipping the part of the stream where the stream is live, but where there is nothing besides a sort of loading screen – the exact details on when the segments begin and end are available in the Appendix, but essentially the first two hours of the day one stream and the first hour of day two were analysed. In addition to the one hour of video from the newcomer stream and three hours of video from the English main stream, some other moments from the main stream are also examined: specifically, small moments from the first two days of the event where Jeremy Lin, Kaci Aitchinson and Jorien van der Heijden are present. All of the content analysed was shown on either the English main stream or the English newcomer stream at some point, the other two main streams in Russian and Chinese are not examined in this thesis, and neither are the various smaller national streams, such as the Swedish one. What is also not examined are the actual games, this part of the analysis is purely focused on the other aspects of the broadcast.

In addition to the few hours of material from the main stream, some of the various supplementary videos produced by Valve are also looked at. Valve produced dozens of videos about various teams,

players, Dota 2 as well as the International itself, and some of these are also under examination. The ones looked at in this thesis include several player profile videos, a series of videos that are extended mini-documentaries on the players and their lives. The player profiles chosen were mostly about players from Europe and North America, as the focus of this part of the thesis is on the Western esports scene, but a Chinese player's profile is included in the first two hours of video from day one of the main stream. The other videos looked at include all five of the introductory videos about Dota 2 produced by Valve for the newcomer stream, as well as the "This is Dota"-video, included in the first hours of material from day one, as well as its own separate Youtube-video. The last video included in the material is a video depicting what happens behind the scenes at the International 5, included within material to be analysed due to a certain similarity it had compared to DVDs introducing the concept of e-sports to outsiders that T.L. Taylor mentions in her book – and like all the other material, the video was also shown during the stream, on day 3, although in this thesis the video is only referenced as its own Youtube-video taken from the official Dota 2-Youtube channel.

For the second part of the analysis, the material is not as clear cut as that in the first part. There is a greater variety of content in 2019, so more content has been examined. Roughly the first hour of the International 9's opening day and day three is analyzed, with a focus on the opening ceremony, and unlike in first part of the analysis, the beginning of the first match of the International 2019 is also looked at as there are some signs of the legacy of the newcomer streams. The beginning of two other matches, Fanatic versus Liquid and Infamous versus Secret, are also looked at as there are clear technical issues present during the first match that hamper the analysis. Most of the matches are ignored, but the pick and ban phase, as well as the first few minutes are looked at for the elements mostly unrelated to the gameplay being shown. The first English "Late Game" postgame show is also examined as something that has expanded the International's slate of content. Except for the VOD on day three of the main event, all material is available on Youtube – for unknown reasons day three of the main event is not available fully in English on the Youtube channel, and a Twitch-rerun has to be relied on instead.

The majority of content analyzed for International 2019 are the various videos produced for the event and shown during various points of the stream, but there are some of them that are looked at in more detail, even if most of them were looked at during the writing of this thesis. "OG

Vacation", a five minute long video following the winners of International 2018, including Johan "N0Tail" Sundstein, is most deeply analyzed as it mirrors the player profile of N0Tail from 2015, "Looking Spicy – Fogged and OD", "Changsa tour with Dove", "Old Boys of Chinese Dota" and "Dota Dads" are also analyzed in detail, and "Tea with Dove", "Dumpling Show" and "Australian Dota" get some closer attention as well, but with less focus on them than the other videos. The content produced for International 2019 varies in style and content far more than when compared to 2015, so it necessitates a wider look into the content than in 2015.

To supplement the analysis, I have also looked at various statistics about the Internationals 5 and 9 based on information collected from www.liquipedia.com, a community based Wikipedia-style collection of information regarding various esports scenes, including Dota 2. Its articles on Internationals 2015 and 2019 were used to collect statistics on things such as player nationalities, ages and other related information, most of which I collected into one large chart included in the appendix. It should be noted information there can sometimes be lacking, it is a community driven effort and has similar issues as Wikipedia, things such as birthdates of some players are sometimes missing or vague, but it is still the most comprehensive publicly available collection of information on various statistics related to esports in general – there is no such academic source. What is specifically taken from there are statistics on player ages, nationalities, and the times they have attended the Internationals, and their lists of members of the different International broadcast teams. These used to be available for 2019 in a special ingame compendium within Dota 2, but it is no longer available and thus a secondary source had to be used, and since Liquipedia also had relevant statistics, it was chosen.

## 4. Analysis part one, International 2015

This first part of the analysis is divided into three separate sections, each focusing on different aspects of the production for the International 5. In the first section the stigma attached to esports and gaming in general is discussed, specifically how it was taken into account in the broadcast, with some special focus given to how women were present on the English main stream. In section 2 the ways the International 5 show took into account newcomers to Dota 2 is examined, and this is mostly examined through the supplementary content to the main stream, the various

introductory videos to Dota 2 and the “TI5 Behind the Scenes with Bruno”-video, although there is a sub-section on the newcomer stream as well. The third and final section is about the professionalization of esports as it can be seen from the broadcast, something that builds upon the preceding sections and where the overall image presented by the broadcast is discussed in detail.

## 4.1. Stigma and overcoming it

Computer games, and esports especially have a certain level of stigma attached to them. The concept of playing computer games for money is something that is hard to understand for people outside gaming communities, and not everyone who is a member of a gaming community understands it either. The stigma is something that Valve had to take into account in their production for the International 5, at least if they wanted to court new viewers from outside the existing spectatorship of Dota 2. The scale of the event was unlike any esports event before it, and it was bound to attract people from outside the gaming community of Dota 2, even if Valve had completely ignored these outsiders – which they did not. While many of these would have already overcome at least some of the stigma by even looking at the different streams of the event, or by coming to the KeyArena where the event was held, the whole phenomena could still be viewed negatively. The stigma could not be ignored. And of course, it was also important to make sure longstanding spectators of professional Dota 2 do not feel alienated or stigmatized, as they were the main demographic interested in the International 5. So, how was the stigma taken into account in the production of the International 5?

Looking at the interviews, newcomer stream, and the general overall production, the stigma is acknowledged by the production of the event. In the player interviews, in several players' cases issues with family and loved ones who might not have been initially supportive of them are mentioned – Sumail, N0Tail, fng and s4 Player Profiles, for example – and the players whose families supported their endeavours are sure to mention this in their interviews – and if the players do not bring it up by themselves, the interviewer usually asks a question about it. The topic is brought up during the pre-show before the matches begin on the first day of the newcomer stream

– the two commentators talk at length about how Dota 2-players are nice people in real life, despite however they act online (47.00 onwards in day 1 of newcomer stream). The directness of the acknowledgement varies, but for the most part in the analysed portions of the broadcast it is indirect, such as when there is talk about the family troubles of the professional players in the interviews. The direct discussion of the toxic reputation of Dota 2 players within the larger gaming community, and other similar subjects in the newcomer stream stem more from the fact that the two commentators of it were seemingly given fairly free reign to do it however they saw fit, something that will be discussed more later on when newcomer stream is discussed in detail. However, when looking at the overall presentation of the event, it is likely that the people in charge of the overall production did give instructions that the matter should be brought up somehow, how the overall production is presented can be seen to try to normalize the concept of esports.

There is a sizeable pool of esports commentators and experts available for any esports production, shoutcasters, interviewers, even statisticians, veterans of esports events. And yet, the production team of the International included one Kaci Aitchinson, a reporter whose primary employer at the time was Fox, and is someone from outside the Dota 2 esports-community – in other words, she is an outsider to the general Dota 2 community. She is someone an American viewer could have seen on TV at some point, and any spectator of the International 5 could see the segments she did for the production, mostly various interviews of both players and random spectators around the KeyArena. Her role could have been filled by several people already embedded in the esports community, yet she was called in. While the International 5 was not the only International Aitchinson has been at, as she was also present at the Internationals 4 and 3, she still is someone whose work is mostly unrelated to esports. It is even noticeable in how she is one of the few members of the broadcasting team who is purely known by her name, and not by a nickname – in fact, if she has a nickname, the spectators were not informed of it. All the other members of the broadcasting team whose names were shown had their nicknames shown as well, and they referred to each other both by their real names as well as their nicknames. Aitchinson was shown to be an outsider, but it was also apparent that she was enthusiastic about what she was doing for the production – that nothing that was going on was shameful, even when she was doing something like interviewing cosplayers, people who had dressed up as characters from Dota 2.

Rather crucially, she was also a woman – it cannot be denied that most of the prominent figures in the Dota 2 scene are male, with a few exceptions, but this will be discussed in more detail later. Aitchinson was shown not as a nerd, but someone from outside the community who still was enthusiastic about the game and the event.

Kaci Aitchinson was not the only one from outside the Dota 2 community that was brought in for the broadcast, Jeremy Lin, a professional basketball player for Charlotte Hornets, also appeared during the second day of the main broadcast. He was not a member of the actual broadcasting team like Aitchinson was, but he was brought in as a guest for the analyst panel. He was even more clearly an outsider to the esports side of the Dota 2 than Aitchinson was, but it was clear that he was similarly enthusiastic about being at the event when the main host, Paul "ReDeYe" Chaloner started asking him questions about Dota 2 (Day 1, 3:05:21 onwards), and what he thought about the match that had been played earlier on stream. Despite his status as a basketball star, he was clearly someone who also enjoyed playing Dota 2 on his free time, enough so that he made time from his busy schedule to play Dota 2 "three times a week during the season". Jeremy Lin was present as a legitimate athlete, through which it was shown that it is not only people already embedded in the gaming community that can enjoy the game, as well as the esports event – but that outsiders can enjoy it too. Through him it could be shown that it is not just the stereotypical nerds that are interested in Dota 2, and some sports sites also reported Lin's appearance in the International coverage (CBS Sports, SB Nation, 2015).

The attitudes towards gaming in the wider society have traditionally been negative, even if the stigma is not as bad as it was before, and people playing esports professionally can cause issues in the players' personal lives. Friends and family members might not understand why the player puts his studies on hold to focus on playing video games on a professional level. This was brought up especially in the player profile-videos Valve produced, in quite a few of them the parents of professional players were interviewed, and they usually state that how proud of their children they are. The decision to interview parents and families especially is an important detail, as most of the players being profiled were young adults, around 20 years old, with the notable exception of Syed Sumail Hassan – whose online player nickname is just a part of his real name, "Sumail" - the

youngest player at the International 5. Despite the average player at the International already being an adult, the production team decided that it was important to show interviews from close friends and family in the player profile videos – that their choice to play Dota 2 on a professional level was accepted. Past clashes over the choice of profession were not glossed over – they were brought up.

In the player profile of Danish Johan “BigDaddyN0Tail” Sundstein, he mentioned how he clashed with his parents over his decision to try to play Dota 2 competitively. Both Vivian and Eivind Sundstein were shown to have felt scepticism at their son’s decisions before, but their attitudes have clearly changed by the time the player profile videos were filmed. “So I forced myself to think different”, Vivian says and talks at length about how she is proud of her son. Similarly a clip was shown in the video where Eivind almost cried when recalling a story about how Johan exclaimed to him after 2014’s International that next year, he would be at the final. Sundstein family is perhaps the best example of how the player profile videos show how the player’s profession is accepted by their immediate family, but far from the only one. In the player profile of Ukrainian Alexander ”XBOCT” Dashkevich, his mother and girlfriend were interviewed, and both do nothing but praise him, in the player profile of Sumail, the youngest player at the International, his family were also shown as very accepting of his career in esports. It was shown that there is nothing to be shameful about in professional gaming for these families, after they got over the initial scepticism.

Rather crucially, even though the stigma was acknowledged, it was done in such a way as to not stigmatize the primary audience of the event. When Kevin “Purge” Godec talked about how Dota 2 players online can be rather hostile on the newcomer stream, he brought it up in the context of enjoying himself at the event, and how in real life the people who were attending the event were all “nice people”. Kaci Aitchinson interviewed a large variety of audience members and professional players, and she did not ridicule any of the various cosplayers she interviewed, except for a few cases where there was good natured joking when the cosplayer wore a humorous costume, such as when Aitchinson interviewed someone dressed up as a character called Faceless Rex, a parody version of the Dota 2 character Faceless Void. Cosplayers are people who dress up as characters from games, television shows, movies and so on, and in this case the cosplayers were

people who were dressed up as various characters from Dota 2.

There is no perceivable shame about anything related to Dota 2 or the International in the broadcast, and it shows even in the minor details: on the main analyst desk, there are several small figurines depicting various Dota 2 characters scattered around. It is a small detail, but a part of how the broadcast embraces the fact that what is happening is that the International is an 18.3 million dollar tournament about competitive video gaming. Gaming culture is not criticised, but accepted and embraced at the event.

#### 4.1.1. Women at the International 5

While there are women participating in esports, they are usually a minority amongst professional players of the currently most popular esports games. Not a single female player competed at any of the five Internationals for example, and Dota 2's direct competitor as an esport, League of Legends, only got its first high level professional female player in 2015. The situation is better in some games played as esports, worse in others, but the fact is that it is rare for women to be professional players. However, there are still women active in the esports scene even in games like Dota 2 where there are practically no professional female players – and a few were a part of the production at the International 5.

Kaci Aitchison and Jorien van der Heijden – better known in the Dota 2-community by her online nickname, “Sheever” – both had a prominent role in the English main stream, Aitchison primarily as an interviewer, and van der Heijden as one of the rotating members of the analyst-panel. Both have been at earlier Internationals, Aitchinson had a similar job at the 2013 and the 2014 Internationals, while van der Heijden has mostly been present in a more unofficial capacity. In 2012 and 2013 she was present as a community member, who mostly produced content for either her own Youtube-channel or for other members of the community, but in 2014 she was one member of that year’s analyst panel. Aitchinson’s role has already been discussed in section 4.1., with emphasis on how she brought in an outsider’s perspective to the show, but the presence of

van der Heijden is important for other reasons. Aitchinson is an outsider to the community, but van der Heijden is a part of the Dota 2-community full time, and she has made a career out of casting and hosting various Dota 2 events. She is also one of the few prominent female figures in the community, and definitely the most well-known, having casted various professional Dota 2-matches since 2012. Her increased prominence at the biggest event of Dota 2 esports-community does mark improvement in how female members of Dota 2-community are represented in the most important events of the Dota 2 esport-scene. With the teams playing at the event, Valve cannot do anything about their composition as none of the sixteen best teams in the world had any women in them, but they can choose the people who will be on camera. The presence of the two women shows the Dota 2-community that it is possible to be a woman and like Dota 2 as an esport – that it is a legitimate interest, and even a career as is the case with Jorien van der Heijden, Aitchinson mostly doing Dota 2-content only during the International in 2015.

Most of the spectators and players of Dota 2 are male, as tends to be the case with most games played as esports. Dota 2 is no exception, but female spectators and players of Dota 2 exist. In the very first interview segment made by Aitchinson, the very first spectator being interviewed was a woman who had come to the International 5 as a spectator, even if she did not play the game herself. Like all the rest of the people Aitchinson interviewed throughout the event, she was enthusiastic about being at the International. She was shown as just some ordinary woman who sees Dota 2 as something fun to watch. Representation is important in legtimizing the role of women in Dota 2 esports, and while the role of women at the International 2015 is limited, they are still present in a few prominent roles.

## 4.2. Dota 2 and the International for new audiences

In her book Taylor mentioned how she was shown a few introductory videos to esports by some organizations (137-138 and 142-143), which were mostly produced for the benefit of potential sponsors. These videos served a simple purpose, to explain what esports are, and why they are worth sponsoring, the videos were essentially advertisements directed at companies. Valve, the company who developed Dota 2 and the organizer of the Internationals, does not need these to

court potential sponsors – the majority of funding for the International 5 came from Valve or the Dota 2-community, through the sale of cosmetic items to the players of Dota 2 as was explained during the section on Dota 2's and the International's history. But similar introductory videos were still used by Valve; the video titled "This is Dota" was shown during the first hour of day one of the broadcast (57:56); the newcomer stream, and the five videos introducing the player roles of Dota 2; the "TI5 Behind the Scenes with Bruno" narrated by Bruno Carlucci; and a small segment by Kaci Aitchinson where she shows how the main panel had been built. Valve does not need sponsors, at least not as a primary source of funding for the International 5, partially thanks to the massively popular International compendiums, so why were these particular videos and clips created? The most likely answer is that they are for the spectators, although they do have similar reasons for their existence – the target group for them is just not sponsors and other interested parties such as Taylor, but the audience of the International 5. The title and narrator of the video also show that the video was mostly aimed at people already familiar with Dota 2 and its esports scene especially: Bruno Carlucci is a man who is popular within the Dota 2 community, as he was a prominent community member until Valve hired him in early 2015, and he speaks with familiarity to the viewers in the video by introducing himself on first name-basis.

The majority of the International 5 audience is most likely already familiar with Dota 2 at least on some level, but as was shown during Aitchinson's early interviews and could be inferred from the Newzoo report's claim that 40% of esports spectators do not play the games they watch, not all who watch Dota 2 play it. These are the people who would find the various introductory videos most helpful, as it would give them important context as to what Dota 2 is, and how enormous the International 5 truly was. The behind the scenes video and "This is Dota"-video emphasizes the sheer size of the event and the popularity of Dota 2, although the latter only focuses on it at the start of the video. How it does it is notable though – "This is Dota" mentions at the start of it that Dota has been played by millions of people for over a decade (0:02), referencing the original Defense of the Ancients custom map as Dota 2 was only publicly unveiled at 2011, mere 5 years ago. It emphasizes the legacy of the game, if something has been played by millions for over a decade, it increases the game's status. Of course, saying Dota has been played by millions for over a decade is slightly dishonest, its early popularity is difficult to estimate as finding exact numbers for the amount of players from those early years when Dota was just a custom map for another

game is close to impossible, it being lost like much of esports history as one unnamed player lamented to Taylor (229). The fact that only footage from Dota 2 is shown also does make viewers unfamiliar with the history of Dota 2 think that it is Dota 2 that has been played for over a decade, not Dota 2 and the original custom map combined.

While the claim is bending the truth somewhat, the point is clear – Dota 2 and the International are events of immense proportions. The "TI5 Behind the Scenes with Bruno"-video further emphasizes this, the video is all about how vast the effort that went into the International 5 had been, and how seriously the event staff take the International. The video gives an impression of a large scale event – when the building of the main stage is shown, there are even actual cranes at the centre of the arena, raising various equipment and parts over the main stage. Carlucci even mentions that the staff want to give the impression of a premier event (0:56). This is a key moment in the video – a confirmation on what is the goal in the overall presentation of the International 5. While the general aspects of the production have not been discussed yet in great detail, most of it was of a very professional quality, as will be shown in the last section of Discussion. The main show was crafted by experts, something designed to evoke an impression of a premier event. Still, there were some aspects of the show that did not have the vast amounts of effort behind them that Carlucci highlighted, such as the newcomer stream.

#### 4.2.1 Newcomer Stream

There is a strange idiosyncrasy in the how Valve approached new spectators of the International 5 and professional level Dota 2 in general – the new introductory videos and the "This is Dota 2"-video are both a new form of approach when compared to earlier Internationals, but newcomer stream has been shrunk down from what it used to be during earlier years. In 2014 the newcomer stream covered most of the games each day, but in the fifth International only the first best of three of each day was casted on the newcomer stream – in 2014 the newcomer stream also casted the group stages held before the main event, the matches that were used to decide seeding at the actual main event, while the 2015 version only casted the first matches of each day of the main

event only. The production values of the newcomer stream went up, but the amount of content produced by the newcomer stream went down. It should also be noted that unlike the main streams in different languages (Chinese, English and Russian), the newcomer stream was only streamed through Twitch, not Youtube or any other live streaming platform – similarly, the VODs of the newcomer stream are only available on Twitch as Valve has not uploaded them to their Dota 2 Youtube-channel unlike most other content produced for the International. The videos produced for the benefit of people new to Dota 2, the five videos explaining player roles of the game, can be found on Youtube, but not the newcomer stream itself.

It is fairly apparent that the hosts of the newcomer stream, Kevin "Purge" Godec and Owen "ODPixel" Davies had a fairly free approach to how they do the newcomer stream, among other things they had free control of the camera showing their casting desk and they had very little communication with the main production team, as was apparent when they missed the fact that a player profile video had begun to play on the main stream. Similarly, the two casters had accidentally left their microphones on when the "This is Dota"-video was shown on the newcomer stream, as their voices could be heard in the background. The newcomer stream was in general not as professional as the main stream, with its setup being somewhat haphazard – instead of a professionally built studio that the main desk had, the newcomer stream had a small desk in front of the audience, where they produced a small show headed by the two casters who were responsible for everything in it, from camera control to the content they produced. Very early on during the first day they even mention their stream is intentionally less professional and more casual in its approach. The English production team's main efforts were in the main stream, not the relatively small side show that the newcomer stream was. From this it can be inferred, that the expectation was that the majority of the audience did not need a newcomer stream, and that they could enjoy watching Dota 2 as a spectator sport even without any major catering to people unfamiliar with Dota 2. It is there for the people who want to watch it, but one has to search to even find it – the website for the International 5 mentioned the newcomer stream, but did not provide any links to it.

New audiences are taken into account in the overall production, the videos introducing Dota 2-

roles and “This is Dota”-video show it clearly, but they are not the key audience the International 5 show caters to. The small focus on the newcomer stream shows that the primary audience is considered to be people who already have some knowledge of Dota 2, and that there is no need for a special focus on accessibility to newcomers. In other words, the production team knows that the primary audience are the millions of people who play and enjoy Dota 2, and that it is large enough that catering to anyone else is a bonus, not a necessity. The newcomer stream specifically shows that Valve did not showcase how professional and legitimate International and Dota 2 esports were to new audiences in some of the content specifically aimed at them, with the content with highest production values being produced mostly for the main stream. There already was a legitimate core audience, who enjoy watching Dota 2.

### 4.3. Legitimization and professionalization

So far the focus has been on mostly supplementary material to the International, with the actual main show of the event, the main stream, being only mentioned to discuss some of the people on the main stream, such as Jorien van der Heijden and Jeremy Lin. As alluded to in earlier sections, vast amounts of effort have been used to evoke a sense of a premier event, from the professionally made mini-documentaries that the player profiles were to the main analyst desk and its panel of commentators – with the exception of the stream’s main host, Paul “ReDeYe” Chaloner, all of the panel’s recurring members are long time members of the Dota 2 esports community. 2015 is the first year that Chaloner has been the main host at the International, and he is one of the few people in esports with over a decade of experience in casting and hosting esports events, having casted his first esports event in 2002 (www.redeyehd.com). He is essentially the one of the most experienced commentators in esports, and a part of how Valve professionalized the event. It is notable how he has absolutely no background in casting or hosting anything except esports, and it is true for most other recurring members of the analyst panel as well. Most of them can be considered to have expert knowledge about Dota 2 or casting it, with the exception of Chaloner himself – Chaloner was the main host due to his experience in hosting esports events, not because of any game knowledge. He kept the other panel members with less experience in being on camera talking through joking around, asking them direct questions related to their expertize, and

made sure there was not a quiet moment when the focus was on the analyst desk instead of the matches themselves.

While none of the other members of the analyst panel had as much experience as Chaloner, they were all well-known figures in the community – Jorien van der Heijden was mentioned earlier as the most well-known female Dota 2 caster, Niklas “Wagamama” Högström is a popular Dota 2 streamer on Twitch and a former professional player of Dota 2, Chat Litt Binn, better known as “Winter”, is a Malaysian professional player as well as an occasional caster, all of the other members have similar amounts of experience. Valve hired the most popular and experienced people in the Dota 2 esports community they could as casters and panel members, making the International 5 a collection of the biggest names in the Dota 2 community. To return to the behind the scenes video, Valve made the International 5 into a premier event as Bruno Carlucci said, and a part of that was to hire only the best commentators they could.

Creating a professional event is not only hiring the biggest names of course, the presentation needs a lot more than that. When one watches the International, the main panel segments are akin to something out of a TV-show – but not quite. There is a graphical overlay that introduces whoever is talking, but it usually includes details that one would not see on television, such as the online nicknames – with a few exceptions, such as Jeremy Lin and Kaci Aitchinson – and Twitter-handles of each caster, analyst, or interviewer. Esports are by their very nature at their home on the internet, and the International 5 is no exception, even if it was an event held in a physical location. There are no things such as advertisement breaks, so the production team was constantly busy producing content for the stream during each day of the six days long main event, with most of the days lasting from 1 pm US time to late in the evening. There was not much dead air during the whole event, after each day’s broadcast officially begun, it would continue until a little after the final match of the day was played. This is likely part of the reason why there was as much supplementary content as there was – it would not be possible to fill all the time between matches with just the members of the analyst panel discussing matches and how the event was going, so there were things such as the player profile videos, Kaci Aitchinson’s segments and the occasional other videos, such as the “TI5 Behind the Scenes with Bruno” video.

Despite the fact that the International 5 show’s primary target audience was Dota 2-enthusiasts, as

discussed earlier, the event was not filled with bizarre inside jokes or any other similar content only enjoyed by the most hardcore fans, as is sometimes the case with small esports events. The event's production was professional, and it did not shy away from the negative assumptions one could make about esports, as discussed in the first main section of the analysis. Any issues families of professional players had with their sons' decisions were brought up, and not just ignored, as could be seen from Johan Sundstein's player profile. Considering how much effort and time was put into the production of the International, enough so that Valve made a video about it, the production could have hidden away all the embarrassing little things about Dota 2 and its players and fans, but they did not. There is very little stigma to be seen in the production of the International main stream, no shame about even the embarrassing qualities of the Dota 2 fandom, such as some bizarre cosplayers, or a fan drinking too much at the start of the day as one early interviewee of Kaci Aitchinson did.

The International 5 was an esports event – and treated as such. The audience was treated as Dota 2 enthusiasts with varying degrees of familiarity with the intricacies of Dota 2, and not only as the most hardcore Dota 2 players with thousands upon thousands of hours of playtime. But neither did the production pretend the event was anything other than what it was, and that Dota 2 was anything besides a game. The production had no need to mimic sports events like the International eSports Federation had done, no need to show Dota 2 and the International as anything besides what it was. The assumption was that Dota 2 as an esport is legitimate, and that it does not need to try and be anything it is not. But whether this conclusion remains the same at the International 2019, four years later, must now be answered.

## 5. Analysis part two, International 2019

Even before going into the details of how the International as a show has changed, it is immediately apparent the event and the broadcast have grown from what they were in 2015. All three broadcasts of the International have more members in them when compared to the earlier incarnation, the English team growing from 24 to 30 official members, the event is held in China, a first for the tournament, the prize pool was a recordbreaker just like every earlier International so

far at 34,3 million, and when scrolling through the various videos Valve has posted to their dota2ti-channel on Youtube, there is simply more things there, and of a greater variety than in 2015, and the main streams of the event are posted in all three main languages, English, Russian, and Chinese, when in 2015 only the English and the Russian streams were posted to their channel. The evolution of the event comes only more apparent as one begins to watch the show from the start, with the first few minutes of the Main Event opening already showing a grander production than in 2015.

While there are some individual elements that specifically cater to a more casual audience that either understands little or nothing about Dota, by now the International itself no longer employs any major methods of courting those outside those already aware of Dota 2. The newcomer stream is no more, neither are there more videos explaining the different roles of Dota, or videos introducing Dota-related concepts in general, and the themes of the introductory videos at the very start of the first day of the Main Event are a bit different to what it was before.

In 2015, ”This is Dota”, a video that explained to the viewers how the game works was shown during the first hour, and it was supplemented by the newbie-stream as well as other videos explaining Dota concepts, shown at various times throughout the broadcast. In 2019, the opening ceremony begins with a grand scale Chinese dance performance accompanied by an orchestra, immediately after which a prerecorded intro video plays, where there is a notable focus on Chinese Dota scene, although pro players in general as well as Dota and its fans are highlighted – some special attention is paid to longstanding veterans of the International that have been at every or almost every International, such as Clement ”Puppey” Ivanov, Daryl Koh ”iceiceice” Pey Xiang and Kuro ”KuroKy” Salehi Takhasomi. Various players alternate with each other completing each other's sentences and forming one continuous speech that alternates languages between English, Chinese and Russian – it is most likely not a coincidence that the three main broadcast languages of the International are the very same. After the introductory video is complete the teams are shown entering the center of the arena one by one to fan applause – except for TNC Predator who are booed at by the Chinese crowd, a Southeast Asian Dota 2 team that was extremely unpopular with Chinese fans due to a controversy regarding one of the players, Carlo ”Kuku” Palad posting a chat message that was racist towards Chinese earlier in the year. Even after that, there is still one more bombastic introductory video shown on stream before finally cutting to the hosts, who are

all introduced by their online nicknames in the banner shown on the lower edge of the screen. This particular detail has not changed that much from 2015, referring to people by their nicknames has remained a steady tradition at the International, albeit there are still some mostly known by their real names, such as Kaci Aitchinson.

Valve has clearly invested more money into the International show than in 2015, considering the sheer scale of the production, and things such as holograms that show which heroes are being picked by the teams during matches – albeit it appears that during the very first match on the first day the technology might have had some issues working, the camera does not really show the stage properly before the match starts, but the brief glimpses do not show the holograms. It might be a bad angle, but it is notable that during the hero picking phase of the second game in the series, the camera cuts multiple times to show the centre of the stage where the holograms of the heroes are. There are also other minor errors visible during the first game, such as the small player cam in the bottom left of the screen glitching out when Lu ”Somnus ´M” Yao's personal camera is shown, all other players cameras work but his only showed a glitched out screen. There were also some issues with the teams entering the arena during the opening ceremony, with the announcer announcing TNC Predator entering the stage, but the team would actually walk to the stage some time later. Despite the minor tech problems near the beginning, the International 2019 is still a more lavish production than 2015's was, and the experience of the production team shows, even in small things. In 2015, the Youtube video of the first day of the Main Event starts by showing a mostly static image, the very beginning of the stream before the show truly started, while 2019 the Youtube version of the stream starts the moment the show starts, with the waiting screen edited out. Many of the same casters and hosts that were present in 2015 are still present in 2019, such as Kaci Aitchinson.

Speaking of Aitchinson, she is not really an outsider to the Dota scene anymore by 2019 – including International 9, she had attended 7 Internationals in total, and by now is an established member of the International broadcast team. And unlike in 2015, she no longer works alone – now she is paired up with Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner, a popular content creator for Dota 2. The two have a far more energetic style together than Aitchinson alone had in 2015, and throughout the International the two interact with fans, players and other hosts in settings outside the main analyst desk, as well as starring in multiple comedic videos. Both have content unique to

themselves as well, with Kaci being the primary interviewer in prerecorded team interviews, and Slacks having some less serious side content such as his series of interviews of Dota personalities and players in the style of ”Hot Ones”, a Youtube series on the channel First We Feast where Sean Evans interviews various celebrities while he and his guests eat increasingly spicy hot wings between questions. Kanner's contributions as talent are a good point to start examining what sort of role any stigma related to professional gaming plays at the International 2019.

## 5.1 Disappearance of stigma at the International 9

In 2015, while Valve made note of the existence of stigma attached to videogames and specifically esports by some, something that they have done in Dota related media before as well, such as their documentary ”Free to Play” where multiple relatives of the professional gamers the documentary is about talk about negative assumptions they have about gaming and esports, it barely appears at the International 2019. While there are plenty of examples of the production showing they feel no need to pay even lip service to negative assumptions about Dota, there is one specific person whose time on camera is the clearest example of Valve unambiguously making the show for the core Dota audience. Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner, and his energetic performance as a part of the broadcast team, especially when paired up with Kaci Aitchinson.

Kanner is consistently presented as a supremely enthusiastic Dota fan, who is always smiling, laughing and participating in something that can only be described as comedic antics, giving a contrast to the main analyst desk who appear far more serious when contrasted to him, even if they also are not afraid to show enthusiasim and a sense of humor at times. Kanner, working aside Kaci Aitchinson, often performs the part of a clown in their shared videos; in ”Tea with Dove”, at the very start of him and Aitchinson sitting down with Zhang ”Dove” Tiange to talk about Chinese Dota culture, Kanner fools around with the tea set, including dropping the tea bag on the ground, putting it back in the cup afterwards, and very loudly slurping the small ceremonial cup empty, in ”The Dumpling Show” after the group has prepared some Chinese dumplings, Kanner presents to them some American pizza rolls that he claims to have brought from the USA by plane, and that they have been unfrozen for several days, with the group commenting about how bad they stink,

after which he and Aitchinson shove a large pile of the pizza rolls in the microwave without even putting them on a plate. Around him, other, more serious members of the broadcast team are also shown in less serious, more self-aware roles, most notably in Kanner's ”Looking Spicy” videos at the International.

In ”Looking Spicy – Fogged and OD” two of the most prominent casters at the International – the ones that were casting the grand finals in 2019 – join Kanner in a special interview show, where Kanner asks a few questions from his guests while both Kanner and the guests eat increasingly spicy hot wings. Owen ”ODPixel” Davies and Ioannis ”Fogged” Loucas are shown at the very beginning of the video with Davies hugging a shivering Loucas with Kanner, with Davies talking about sharing bodyheat with Loucas. Both give a mix of serious to comedic answers to the questions Kanner poses, most notably when Loucas critiques Davies Dota 2 gameplay in the middle of the interview. There is a willingness there to be the target of mockery by Davies and Loucas, and the camera does not shy away from showing Loucas' bad reaction to the stronger sauces near the end of the video. It should also be noted that each hot sauce is labeled with a special custom Dota label, with each one referring to various Dota heroes, such as ”Cinder Brew Blowout” with an image of the Dota hero Brewmaster or ”Nuclear Blowout” with a picture of Techies on the label. The entire segment is also clearly inspired by the very popular Youtube series *Hot Ones* where the format is nigh identical, with the host interviewing various celebrities while both eat hot wings with increasingly strong hot sauces between questions. Casters have been known to imitate sports casters (Sells, 2015), and this is somewhat similar – except instead of copying manners from traditional media, this time a mostly online phenomenon looks to other online media for inspiration. Below is a series of screenshots showing the similarities between the two shows:

*Fig 1. Looking Spicy – Fogged and OD*

*Fig 2. Gordon Ramsay Savagely Critiques Spicy Wings | Hot Ones*


*Fig 3. Looking Spicy – Fogged and OD*


*Fig 4. Gordon Ramsay Savagely Critiques Spicy Wings | Hot Ones*

In addition to everything described so far, in 2019 there was also the ”Late Game with Dakota and PyrionFlax” hosted by Ted ”PyrionFlax” Forsyth and Dakota Cox – also known as ”Kotlguy”, but

notably only referred to by his real name – a casual aftershow where the two hosts talk about the day both among each other and with various guests in a more relaxed setting – when the two hosts appear on camera, both have a beer on the table in front of them, and they are clearly in some sort of bar. This is the second time Valve has produced these shows, with the first being in 2018, which the hosts also mention at the start of the very first Late Game*,* and just like Looking Spicy was inspired by something, so is Late Game*,* albeit this time it is more of a genre it is mimicking with its own twists, being very much a talk show in a relaxed setting. Various competitors at the International and members of the broadcast team are also present in the bar, with Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner being clearly visible in the background of the first episode for much of the first half, for example. While this thesis only looks at the English version, there are also Russian and Chinese Late Games hosted by different hosts, but being mostly the same in concept. The hosts and the guests act rather casually, with Forsyth making references to his comfort zone being ”in a bar” (8:25). One of the first guests, Grant ”GrandGrant” Harris, refers to himself self-deprecatingly early on as having been a ”typical online internet goblin”, one of the few moments when anything related to stigma appears at the International. As with most of the examples of taking note of stigma, the case in Late Game is a very minor acknowledgement, but there is one example where stigma is somewhat in focus, in ”Changsa tour with Dove”*.*

In the video, Dove, a member of the Chinese broadcast team walks around the city of Changsa with a group of veteran members of the Chines Dota 2 scene, where they had got their start many years ago, and they reminisce about their past experiences as they walk around the city. At the start of the video, the group are trying to find the old internet cafe where they used to train. They find out, however, that the place was demolished at some point, albeit they at least find an old hotel in which they used to sometimes rent rooms while training. They end up talking about their early training, and how it was kind of difficult for them, and Chen ”Zhou” Yao talks about how his parents did not approve of him playing Dota. He recalls an incident during which his father ended up finding him playing in the middle of the night, and how he got rather spooked by the experience at the time (1:57). However, the final speech in the video reveals that eventually Yao's parents understood that he was not just playing for fun after he begun to attain success in Dota, and his last comments before the video ends are about the positive impacts of Dota 2.

*Dota as a game can bring many people together. It gathers all kinds of people, and let's*

*them get to know each other. This is the real charm of the game.*

-Chen ”Zhou” Yao, *Changsa Tour With Dove*

Yao's parents did have a stigma about Dota 2, but as they saw that their son could create a career out of professional gaming, according to him they begun to accept his choices. His experiences with stigma are in the past, and he promotes a positive impression of Dota when given the chance. Stigma was acknowledged here, and then minimized by talking about Dota 2's positive impact. This is similar to 2015's ways of acknowledging stigma, but its notable that it is the only time in 2019 where stigma is acknowledged in a similar way to 2015.

The content referring to Dota 2 as a game specifically has also changed – in 2015, it was mostly about the tutorial videos on how the game and the various ingame positions each player has work, but in 2019 the primary target audience of the content related to the game itself are the fans of Dota 2. There is the short film contest entries, short animations created by Dota 2's fans about the characters of Dota 2, two videos introducing heroes that would be released soon after their unveiling and the cosplay contest where fans competed on who had the best Dota 2 character costume. The two hero-videos are specifically rather notable – ”Snapfire” that introduces the character of Snapfire, and her steed, firebreathing lizard Mortimer, is in fact an animated short film. It tells its own, short little self-contained story about the titular Snapfire retrieving a bunch of her cookies from two other Dota heroes who steal them, and like most of the videos mentioned in this section, it is comedic in tone. ”Voidspirit” is less humorous, but the personality of Voidspirit is also a more serious one – and the video shows a combination of technology and live show in how the character is introduced. It begins with a short animated section where the Voidspirit is talking, ending with the character teleporting away somewhere – that somewhere being revealed to be the middle of the arena, as a hologram of the Voidspirit teleporting in appears there, where he speaks a few lines in Chinese, his voice delivered through speakers to the crowd inside the arena. The virtual and the real exist side by side, as a videogame character directly speaks to the fans of the game he is from on a live broadcast watched by countless fans across the globe.

### 5.1.1 Women at the International 9

When it comes to members of the broadcast team and players at the event, at first glance nothing

has really changed when it comes to women, if only looking at player statistics and members of the main broadcast team. There are still no women playing at the International and the reasons are still the same as in 2015, no female highly skilled players playing in teams capable of reaching the International, Kaci Aitchinson and Jorien ”Sheever” van der Heijden are still the prominent female members of the English broadcast team, although Helen ”Xiituzi” Xu is listed as an interviewer as a minor addition to the team. Compared to some of its competitiors, it appears Dota 2's premier esports event is lagging behind. *Apex Legends* (2019), for example has some prominent female players, such as Elvira ”Esdesu” Temirova who has had moderate success having won 3 tournaments and most recently qualifying for *Apex Legends Global Series Championship 2021* from the Europe, Middle East and Africa-region. However, that does not mean there were not any changes in how women were present at the International 9, and Kaci Aitchinson's expanded role is one example of this – she is no longer merely an interviewer, but an host in her own right, albeit specializing in different style of content than those attending the analyst deck.

In 2015, Aitchinson was mostly an interviewer, and while she still does interviews during the broadcast, her role has expanded from 2015. In 2019, she still is the primary major interviewer Valve employs, appearing in several videos where she interviews members of a pro team such as ”Evil Geniuses Interview with Kaci” for example, videos that are usually shown before or between matches involving the teams she has interviewed, but she has another more prominent role now. In 2016, Aitchinson was paired up with Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner at the International 6, and the two of them worked well as a comedic duo as they interviewed fans, bantered before the allstar match, and generally acted in casual and comedic ways on camera, the two have worked as a pair at every International after 2016. While both do content at International 9 where the other one is absent, the majority of the time they are paired up, interacting with fans, each other, pro players or the hosts when doing live segments, and they are also starring in multiple comedic videos, such as ”Kaci and Jake's Mandarin Lessons”, ”Tea with Dove”, ”The Dumpling Show” and ”Making Friends” – and these videos also show how the role of women at the International has expanded.

Zhang ”Dove” Tiange and Kang ”Eve” Zhexi star in The Dumpling Show and Making Friends alongside Kanner and Aitchinson, and Tiange appears in Tea with Dove as well as well as being the main interviewer of Chinese teams, when in 2015 Aitchinson was the one that handled teams of all

nationalities. While not listed as members of the English broadcasting team, they are still a part of the overall production, and are officially members of the Chinese broadcast team. Zhexi and Tiange's presence already shows there is an increased presence of women as a part of the English broadcast, but although they are very clear and prominent presences in these videos, there are much more incidental appearances by women in the broacast than there used to be. In ”Dust of Appearance – Evil Geniuses” there is a minor appearance by Shannon Larkin, the team manager of Evil Genius, Steph ”Anuxi” Everett, an Australian artist who has made ingame cosmetics for various Dota heroes, appears in ”Australian Dota” where Kanner showcases the Australian Dota community with the help of Everett who accompanies him for most of the video as he visits a local esports cafe and interviews random patrons there, and a female member of the Chinese broadcast team hosts the cosplay contest. Dove also joins several veteran Chinese players on a tour of Shanghai in Changsa tour with Dove. ”Australian Dota” is especially notable, as Anuxi is chosen as the main representative of Australian Dota, despite another prominent Australian, David ”Godz” Parker, also appearing later in the video, as well as in general at the International as a commentator.

Even if there are clearly more male members in the broadcast teams and the amount of professional women competitors remains zero, there is a notable change from 2015 to 2019 in how women are present. In addition to Aitchinson's expanded role, van der Heijden is also in a more prominent role, having been promoted into one of the hosts instead of analysts in 2019. It should also be noted that van der Heijden was actually specifically highlighted in 2018's International, as she had been struggling with breast cancer that she had been diagnosed with in 2017, with Valve producing a mini documentary about her life after the diagnosis, ”Sheever's Story” (2018). While she did not have specific segments shown as their own videos in 2019, van der Hejden was acting as one of the primary hosts throughout the event, being a part of the rotating cast of main desk hosts, equal to hosts like Paul ”RedEye” Chaloner, the most veteran esports caster at the event. While Dota community is mostly male, at least the image Valve presents at the International shows that their role has grown from 2015 to 2019, no longer is it just Aitchinson and van der Heijden, but others are present as well, from community artists to members of the support teams of competitors at the International.

### 5.1.2. Change in tone

When examining the International 2019 and the videos Valve produced for the event in comparison to the ones produced for the 2015 International, there is a clear shift in tone. Something like enchanced production quality is to be expected, something that can naturally happen when the creators of an event and media get more experience and funding, as seems to be the case when considering things like holograms of Dota 2 characters shown on the main stage during the pick and ban phase, but there are clear changes in style when it comes to the videos produced for the two Internationals. For the most part, in 2015 the overall tone was somewhat more serious – there was levity here and there, of course, but nothing on the level of 2019. Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner earlier was written about earlier as an example of any acknowledgement of stigma attached to esports being gone, and his content is more in line with the general increase in levity when compared to 2015.

In 2015, there was distinct sense of a professional atmosphere throughout most of the event. While there were moments of levity scattered throughout the event, and the casters, hosts and analysts would joke around somewhat, most of the videos Valve produced for the event were more serious in tone. They were interviews with teams, player profiles of various notable players essentially in the style of mini documentaries, such as Johan ”N0Tail” Sundstein's player profile video that was looked at earlier. The All Star Match in 2015 was a notable exception to the general tone of the event, as it involved two teams mixed with pro players and casual fans from the audience battling it out in a custom gamemode, for the prize of a giant block of cheese, all the while it involved casters being intentionally biased towards one team or the other, and a surprise reveal of Danil ”Dendi” Ishutin being one of the audience members disguised under a Pudge-cosplay. While 2019 still has the more serious interviews conducted by either Kaci Aitchinson or Zhang ”Dove” Tiange , there is a far wider variety of videos produced for the event, with the vast majority being more or less comedic in tone. Kanner's videos were already discussed at length earlier, but there is a rather direct comparison we can make to a video from 2015 – ”An OG Vacation”.

There are no more player profile videos at the International like there were in 2015, instead Valve

produced videos with starring different teams competing at the event. The term *starring* is used deliberately here – none of these videos exist to document their subjects like the player profile videos did, and their style is not mostly uniform like the ones produced for 2015. An OG Vacation is a short, five and a half minutes long video about the winners of the International 2018 spending some time on vacation in Australia. The video opens with a few members of team OG putting on wetsuits, with Johan ”N0tail” Sundstein – who had changed his nickname back back to N0tail since 2015 – being the focus of the shot, before the video briefly cuts to an overhead shot of a boat at sea, with overlaid text explaining that the videomakers accompanied OG on vacation 4 months after they had won International 8. Three of the five players are then shown fooling around on the beach, with the nicknames of each of the three being shown on screen as they play in the water, starting with Sundstein and followed by Jesse ”Jerax” Vainikka and Sébastien ”Ceb” Debs, the latter having changed his nickname from 7ckingMad.

Afterwards the video moves on to the team on a boat, where it is revealed that Topias ”Topson” Taavitsainen is not on vacation with the others, and he is represented by a cardboard cutout of himself in his International 2018 team jersey. The last member of the team, Anathan ”Ana” Pham is also now present, and he helps the cardboard cutout fish with the other teammates. After some fishing there is a more somber moment as the group talk about their experiences at winning the International while the camera occasionally cuts out to moments after their victory accompanied by a similarly somber soundtrack. The moment is interrupted by someone noticing one of their fishing lines has gone taut, with everyone's attention then returning to fishing. As Sundstein is trying to reel in the fish, Jerax comments about putting in some action video music to accompany the shot, which the video's editors did put in during the following montage of the group catching fish, including a joke about the cardboard cutout catching one. After the montage ends Sundstein comments ”On the next shot we are cooking”, which indeed happens. The second half of the video consists entirely of the team sitting around a table eating the fish they caught, and talking about various subjects. They begin with somewhat returning to the subject of winning the International, talking more about their feelings after the victory, how it affected their motivation and other similar subjects. While there is a slight somberness to the discussion at the start of it, the video ends on a joke, with Sundstein joking about how he has been sending weekly emails to Gabe Newell, the president of Valve, to plead for the return of a humorous ingame voiceline to Dota 2.

While the video clearly has its more somber moments, and it could be argued Sundstein is the main star of it, its still vastly different in style than his player profile in 2015. They are of course an entirely different style and even genre of videos, but that is the point – player profile videos are now gone. Instead, there are these videos that highlight teams or groups, not individuals, with the sole exception of the few videos where Aitchinson interviews a pro player while they are both getting a massage, such as ”Kaci and s4 massage”. As mentioned earlier, the team interviews are often more serious, but just like with Kanner's ”Looking Spicy”, these interviews are less serious ones with a humorous undertone to them – albeit in the massage interviews the humor is more dry, coming from the juxtaposition of serious questions asked in an unlikely situation, that is to say while both interviewer and interviewee are being massaged. Other slightly more serious videos and segments, like the ”Changsa tour with Dove”, where former Chinese pro players reminisce about an internet cafe that has since closed down and its owner that helped them get their start in competitive gaming still have a lighter tone, with fairly upbeat music in the background and a general tone of nostalgia, even if some negative memories are also brought up.

To summarize 5.1. somewhat, it would appear that despite all the growth of the event, there is deliberately a less professional tone. In 2015, there was a concentrated effort to reach out to those outside the core Dota 2 audience, but one can already see that this is no longer the case. The event has become more legitimized for both the audience and those creating it, and as discussed, there is less attention paid to any stigma related to gaming, it likely being less relevant to those watching an event in its ninth consecutive year. However, this does not mean these efforts were fully abandoned – rather, some lessons learnt were integrated into the experience in ways beneficial both to new audiences as well as long time Dota fans.

## 5.2. Dota and the International for new and old audiences

The newcomer stream is gone, the tutorial videos showcasing aspects of Dota are gone, but not quite everything is abandoned. Creators of the newbie stream, Purge and ODPixel are both still around, one as a caster and one as an analyst, and there are a few things present in the broadcast that seem to be designed to help newcomers specifically. Those that are outside the core Dota community are still acknowledged sometimes, and there are a few features during the games

themselves that are helpful for those less familiar with the game. The production has introduced a feature where during the character picking phase of every game, when the camera is focused on the players and the middle stage where holograms of heroes being picked appear, they can put up a panel on the left side of the screen where the hero and its abilities are shown, with a little picture-within-picture video showcasing how its abilities look like ingame (Fig. 5.).

This feature is not present during the very first game of the International, but there is some indication the production crew was having technical issues, such as the player camera for Lu ”Somnus` M” Yao showing a glitched out static image during the first game. There is also a feature where at the start of the game, as the ingame camera shows each ingame hero controlled by a player, there is a portrait of the player on either the left or right side of the screen depending on whether the player is on Radiant or Dire to allow viewers more easily recognize who is playing what character. (Fig. 6.) After this introduction is done, there is also a playercam on the left side of the screen, next to picture of the hero currently being focused on (Fig 7.).


*Fig 5. Fnatic vs. Liquid BO1, 13.59. Hero panel on the left, hologram of the hero on the right*


*Fig 6. Infamous vs. Secret BO3, 14:38.*


*Fig 7. Infamous vs. Secret BO3, 21:59*

What is notable about these features is that they are useful to core fans as well as fans more unfamiliar with Dota 2 or its heroes; at the time of the International 2019, there were 117 different heroes in Dota 2, each with their own unique abilities and playstyle – it is not certain that even a veteran player would remember each and every single one and how their abilities work. Being able to more easily connect a hero to the person playing it provided by the portraits and the playercams also make it easier to follow which player is which hero, and as an added benefit the playercams give the audience a chance to follow how the players react to whatever happens during the match. New audiences do not get the secondary focus they used to have in 2015, and instead features helpful to them are explicitly also useful to the core audience.

### 5.2.1. The Chinese international and the expanding of the Dota 2 scene

One thing that has to be taken into account when talking about the 2019 International is the fact that it is the second ever International to be hosted outside of North America – the first International being hosted in Cologne, Germany in 2011, and 2018's event being hosted in Vancouver, Canada – and how it has affected Valve's presentation of the event. While all Internationals have had content showcasing Dota players and their lives from various nations, International 9 has a special focus on China themed sidecontent. Aitchinson and Kanner star in multiple videos about them interacting with Chinese culture and people, there are videos about retired Chinese players, and how Gabe Newell in his traditional opening greeting ends it by thanking China, Shanghai, and local government for hosting the International. It is also the first International where the in the stadium itself the primary language is other than English – every International before 2019 has had English as its main language and broadcast, but the ninth iteration is different. The reason for this is very understandable, as being located in Shanghai means Chinese fans will be the closest to the event itself, so it is to be expected that the majority of the live crowd would be Chinese, it is just a change from the norm that has to be noted. Valve was also planning to have International 2020 in Sweden until the pandemic hit and cancelled any plans, so at the time of writing it is impossible to say would an International in North Europe have a similarly sized spotlight on local Dota community.

Excluding the team interviews, there are nine videos with a Chinese themed subject on the dota2-channel – or ten if one includes ”Dust of Appearance – Vici Gaming”, as it and ”Dust of Appearance – Evil Geniuses” are a specific style of skitbased video. It can be argued that it is more important

that the stars of both of these videos are Dota players than any other theme, and the central joke of the video is of the team thinking one of their players has been dead for several months, something that would work as a skit based on almost any other team at the International. The opening ceremony was also heavily focused on Chinese Dota.

Chinese Dota is specifically hyped up in the first prerecorded video of the International 2019's opening ceremony, where the various pro players talk about the importance of China's place in the Dota 2 esports scene. Historically Chinese teams and players do have an important role, and this is not the first time that Valve has put a spotlight on it – in Free to Play (2014), Valve's documentary following three players at the very first International, one of the competitors mentions that the Chinese teams are the teams to beat. While ultimately an Eastern European team wins, Natus Vincere or Navi as they are commonly known, the second place team was Ehome, a Chinese team with several veterans of the original Defense of the Ancients' esports scene. Of the nine Internationals, Chinese teams have won three times, and been second five times. Only European teams have won more total Internationals than Chinese teams as a region, and they tend to be more top heavy – an European team has only placed second once in the history of the Internationals, in 2019, when the top 4 teams were dominated by European teams with only the third place finisher being a non-European team. This same third place finisher was the top placing Chinese team, so even if China as a region is no longer as dominant as it might have once been in 2019, it is still one of the most important regions of Dota 2 – it is just not quite as prominent, as can also be seen by the number of Chinese players dropping from 27 in 2015 to 18 in 2019. It should be noted that this might also be at least partially due to the expanding of the number of regions represented at the International when compared to 2015.

While China was the region given special focus during International 2019's broadcast, other regions did also receive some special attention. Australia's scene was highlighted by Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner's video *Australian Dota* as a showcase of a more minor scene, something that he has been doing in earlier Internationals as well, such as with Japanese scene in ”Mara Cup” (2018) where Kanner visited with a camera crew in Japan to showcase a minor tournament in Japan. There was also representatives of a new region in 2019 when compared to 2015, the South American representatives of team Infamous who ended up on the joint 7th-8th place. In 2019 the only continent that remained unrepresented at the International was Africa, with players or teams

coming from every other major region of the world. Total amount of different nationalities at the event has also grown, from 20 in 2015 to 30 in 2019 (Liquipedia) – albeit it should be noted these nationalities refer to immigrants as the nationality of the country they immigrated from, such as the Hassan brothers ”SumaiL” and ”YawaR” who immigrated from Pakistan to the United States.

### 5.2.2.Dota Dads, Old Boys and the aging game and community

When looking at the statistics for Chinese pro players attendance at the Internationals, it seems to indicate a generational shift has happened within that scene – only 3 of the 41 Chinese players who attended in 2015 or 2019 attended both of the Internationals examined in this thesis. Dota as an esport – referring to both the original Defense of the Ancients as well as Dota 2 in this case – is old enough as an esport that a generational shift can occur, a rarity among esports and a sign of the professionalization and legitimization of Dota 2 esports. Evidence suggests Valve is well aware of the generational shift, as evidenced by two of their short videos being about Chinese pro players who have mostly retired from active play. ”Dota Dads” stars Zhang ”xiao8” Zing, Jiang ”YYF” Cen, Chen ”Hao” Zhihao and Huang ”LongDD” Xiang and their unnamed families, with their children being especially highlighted. The video opens up with Cen, Zhihao and Xiang sitting on a couch presumably in the home of one of the players, Cen holding a baby in their arms while a boy is running around in the foreground, before the video briefly cuts to Zing with his child in a park. In the three minute video each of the fathers talk about how having a child has affected them and their daily lives, and some Dota-related subjects related to their children, whether they would teach their children to play Dota one day or what Dota-hero their child would be.

All four of the players were around thirty years of age at the time of TI9, Zhihao being the youngest at 28, and Cen the oldest at 32. All of them had attended at least one International, mostly the early ones, and two of them – Zing and Zhihao - attended the very first one, marking them all as members of the first generation of Chinese Dota pro players who played Dota 2 at a professional level. Despite their various levels of retirement from pro play, they are still clearly relevant to the Dota audience, especially the Chinese one, as evidenced by Valve having them star in two videos shown during the International in China, as most of them also appear in ”Old Boys of Chinese Dota”. This is further shown by Cen talking about them actively streaming 8-10 hours a day as their

job – livestreaming as a day job cannot happen unless one still has an active following, and some of these players have been notable members of the Chinese Dota community for more than a decade by this point, as all have some history in the original Defense of the Ancients Warcraft 3 mod's competitive scene.

Dota 2 is a fairly old game by the standards of the wider gaming world, the vast majority of multiplayer games fail within weeks of launching as their playerbase never takes off, but Dota 2 to this day remains a game where hundreds of thousands of people are playing it any given moment. It and *Counter-Strike: Global Offensive* (2012) dominate the playercounts on Steam, a large store platform in the PC market. Both are also legacy games, with a history stretching beyond their launch date, with Dota 2's history being discussed in section 2.4., and the focus on Chinese veterans in these two videos shows Valve acknowledging this long history of their games. Xiang, for example, was active as a player in the original Defense of the Ancient's competitive scene as early as 2006 (Liquipedia), something that is not rare among the first generation of Dota 2's competitive players, many of whom attended the first few Internationals. Clement ”Puppey” Ivanov, Estonian pro player and one of only two players to have attended every single International, the other being Kuro ”KuroKy” Salehi Takhasomi, another European veteran player are also examples of this first generation of Dota 2 pro players with a long history stretching back to the original Defense of the Ancients mod. Puppey started his esports career in 2007 (dotavideo.ru, 7.2.2013) and KuroKy also had his beginnings at roughly the same time, joining a team with Puppey in 2008 – however, unlike the Chinese veterans shown in the two videos dedicated to them, he is still playing competitively at the time of writing, and Team Secret whose captain he was at the International 2019 finished fourth. Despite the retirement of most of the original Chinese Dota veterans – one was still active at International 9, Zhang ”LaNm” Zhicheng, 29 at the time – there still exists a small group of veterans around their thirties still playing at the top level.

Returning to the retired veterans, in addition to the small personal interest stories about veterans, they are present in the Dota broadcast in other ways. Of the official 30 members of the International 2019 English broadcast team, almost all of the talent listed as analysts have competitive professional experience, and the majority had mostly retired from professional competition, albeit Nico ”Gunnar” Lopez was a notable exception as the youngest of the analysts. The Russian and Chinese broadcast teams are similar in their large amount of retired or semi-

retired players in analyst roles, with some notable members of the Chinese competitive scene also being listed as casters, most notably Leong ”ddc” Fat-meng – he is a Macau national, but his most notable achievements have been in Chinese teams, including 8 appearances at the International. 8 out of the 10 of the English analysts had former professional experience, and 5 of them had attended International as a player before – comparing to 2015, there were 24 official members in the English broadcast team, and out of these only 6 were former or current professionals, and only 3 of them had played at the International. Two of these three went on to attend future Internationals, Sébastien ”Ceb” Debs – he used the nickname 7ckngMad in 2015 – notably winning the International in 2018 and 2019 with team OG.

The Old Boys are a group of former Chinese Dota pro players, most of them having their roots in the original Defense of the Ancients competitive scene before Dota 2. According to the group themselves in Old Boys of Chinese Dota, they are currently a 10-man group of former professionals who regularly cast Chinese events and stream gameplay to their fanbases. Dota as a phenomenon is old enough that by 2019, people who began playing Defense of the Ancients as teenagers before the release of Dota 2 in late 2000's are now in the middle of their adult lives, and people who began their esports careers during those early days of Dota as an esport still have their fan bases, as shown by the Old Boys. Dota 2 is an established enough esport that its fanbase and active community members are not just young men in their twenties, with the average age of the personalities steadily rising. Men like Paul ”RedEye” Chaloner and Alan ”Nahaz” Bester – and generally it is older men specifically, women with significant esports experience of that level are generally not seen in similar roles, or at all in most cases - also represent an even older generation of active members of the Dota scene, both being in their fourties, and both of them entered the scene at an older age. Chaloner is an old veteran of esports in general, but Nahaz became interested in Dota 2 and esports at an older age than most:

> *It was completely a sequence of accidents. I’ve told this story before, but long story short, I have a brother-in-law who’s 14 years younger than me, I was looking for a way to relate to him and it happened to be that I spent a week on vacation with my in-laws – a week after I heard Toby cast the first International. So, I happened to bring up Dota with him and he was a Warcraft Dota player. We got our beta keys together and he sort of taught me the game. That was around the same time I had done baseball and college basketball statistics as a*

*hobby, but I was getting bored, and when I started watching pro Dota, I saw the same kind of strategic principles, a lot of the same potential for the use of data, in a completely new environment. I happen to love Dota and I want to continue working with this game as long as I can, but I think there's tremendous potential in other esports, as well.*

*Nahaz interview: Balancing Dota, family life and academia, 2.12.2015 www.dotablast.com retrieved through Wayback Machine 26.5.2021*

Without accurate statistics on casual player and viewer ages it is difficult to ascertain how old the primary audience of Dota 2 is, but when looking at certain decisions Valve made in their production there are at least some indicators that Dota 2's community would be older than those of some younger esports, such as Overwatch League, or Apex Legends' competitive scene. There is the highlighting of old veterans like the Old Boys, who are shown to have remained a popular part of the Chinese Dota 2 scene despite their retirement, the presence of older members of the broadcast crew, and the fact that the average age of the hosts and analysts trends around their thirties, with most of them having participated in the Dota 2 scene since its early years, and it is not rare for them to have experience of some kind going back all the way to the original Defense of the Ancients. The scene in China specifically has been legitimate and professionalized the longest, but considering the presence of older esports veterans at the International in 2019, the Western scene is also approaching similar state in regards to the two processes.

## 5.3 Professionalization and legitimization at the International 2019

At the end of the 2015 analysis, I stated that the International, as it was presented, showed an event that was showing many signs of professionalization and legitimization, but when compared to International 9, the fifth one seems positively uncertain about its own status. The earlier International was more constrained in its style, deliberately trying to give an uniform impression in most of its content, and dedicating a significant amount of time to helping those outside the Dota 2 scene better understand the game and how the esports scene itself works. As discussed at the start of 5.1., those unfamiliar with Dota 2 are not forgotten as certain new elements in showing the matches can help people with less knowledge of Dota 2 better understand what is happening

ingame, there is just no more content clearly targeted at them, like the tutorial videos of 2015. Whatever Valve's motivations for this were, the fact is that in 2019 International's live broadcast the amount of content targeted at those unfamiliar with Dota 2 is miniscule compared to 2015.

The tonal changes discussed in 5.1.2. as well as the diminished attention paid to any stigma attached to gaming further show the shift in presentation. There is less 'serious' content compared to content with deliberate levity to it. *An OG Vacation* shows a stark contrast to 2015's player profile of Johan ”N0Tail” Sundstein in various ways, but perhaps most importantly, it is an entirely different genre of video in its style. There are no videos in the style of the mini documentaries of 2015, with the closest in style being the video simply titled ”Alliance”*,* where the different members of team Alliance talk to the camera about their team and Dota 2 experiences while spending time in a park, with the video occasionally cutting to various clips from the team's history, and even that does not really follow the structure of the player profiles of International 5. In International 2019 the focus on the core Dota audience is stronger, and the in-event efforts to draw in spectators from outside the core audience are neglible. While the International 2015 as an event already presented itself as legitimate, comparing to 2019 it would appear an effort to appear legitimate may have somewhat constrained the sort of style the production team was comfortable with in 2015. In 4.3. I specifically took note of the absence of ingroup jokes at the International 2015, while in 2019 there is Dust of Appearance - Evil Geniuses, a satrical video where the team specifically makes fun of people saying they are not a ”real North American team” as there are mostly immigrants and Europeans on the team, a humoristic video that an outsider might not understand due to not knowing the context for the jokes. There are no videos showcasing the effort that has gone into the production like in 2015, but that does not mean there are no serious clips available from the International 2019.

The very beginning of the International 2019 shows how Valve and the production team view the legitimacy of the International and Dota 2 scene. After the performance by the dancers and the orchestra ends the first of the two intro videos begins, and they are perhaps the most serious in tone of all the videos examined throughout this analysis. The first one begins by by making it clear this International is a culmination of the Dota 2 scene, and a special moment in the history of Dota 2 – and esports itself:

*This is it. This is the moment. This is what every game of your whole life was building to. This tournament exists because we all love Dota, its as simple as that. To have your name on the aegis, its proof that you belong. But its not just about the aegis. TI is a global celebration of Dota. We all love this game. The highs. And the lows. Its not just what happens in the game, its the bonds you make with the people outside of it. Building friendships that will last for the rest of your life. Being at the first International, you knew it was something special. It was like taking Dota and esports to the next level. One thing has remained the same. The strength of Chinese Dota. Even before there was a TI, China was the epicentre of competitive Dota. And the Chinese audience is one of the largest, and most passionate in the world. Hosting the International here has special meaning, it feels like... Dota has finally come home. This is the dream, to play on the main stage, with a chance for the aegis. Its not a dream – its the International. Because of you, we get to compete in the biggest esport event in history. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you, and thank you Shanghai for hosting us.*
*Lets play some Dota.*

*International 2019 – Opening Ceremony*

There are a few things here that I want to highlight; the players emphasizing how the event could not happen without the fans, highlighting International being the culmination of Dota 2, and Daryl Koh ”iceiceice” Xei Piang bringing up ”Being at the first International, you knew it was something special” where in context it seems to highlight the first International as an important moment in esports as a whole. It could be argued that there is an intention there to present the International 2019 not just as an important moment in Dota 2 history, but in esports history itself, a recurring theme from 2015's opening ceremony. The video tries to establish that the International is an institution within esports – and one whose fans are just as much to thank for it as the players and the game's creators. Throughout the event the fans' efforts are highlighted in both a short film contest as well as a cosplay contest, community figures such as Steph ”Anuxi” Everett and creators of Chinese fan comics get highlighted, and of course, the prize pool. Despite Dota 2's age, this mostly community funded prize pool is still the highest in esports, despite the best efforts of competitors such as Epic Games' Fortnite World Cup Finals with its 30 million prize pool held in July in 2019.

Of course, by 2015 Internationals were already well established, but the scale and professionality of the International emphasize how entrenched it has become. In multiple videos veterans of Internationals past are highlighted, starting in the very Opening Ceremony video that was just discussed – and not only that, veterans whose roots go back to the time before Dota 2, to the days of the Warcraft 3 mod Defense of the Ancients, even if it is only referred to as Dota and Warcraft 3 is not mentioned. Internationals 2 to 7 were held in Seattle, Washington, near the headquarters of Valve, but since 2018 Valve has been holding them outside the United States, first in Canada in 2018, and in Shanghai in 2019. Despite moving away from familiar surroundings and Seattle's Key Arena, the production quality has only gone up, with new innovations introduced in 2019 compared to before despite the potential difficulties of a company headquartered in the United States operating in China. Dota 2 as a game and an esports phenomenon has been around long enough that there is a stable of retired professionals the International can comfortably draw from to have as analysts, with experienced casters with years of experience as Dota 2 casters. The Old Boys as an organization, and the content highlighting them also shows that not only is it possible to be a Dota 2 professional, but that there is a possibility of continuing on to a career in Dota 2's esports scene after retirement as well. Nor does one necessarily have to become a caster to continue - Jonathan ”Loda” Berg, team Alliance's coach who appears in ”Looking Spicy – Alliance” and the video Alliance is a former professional player who won the third International. 2015 already showed that getting a living as a professional player is a legitimate profession, albeit one that might have stigma attached to it, and 2019's presentation shows that it has expanded to more than that. There are also some outsiders to Dota 2 who have become insiders – Kaci Aitchinson has become a part of the International as an institution, as has Jorien ”Sheever” van der Heijden and Paul ”RedEye” Chaloner. Although the latter did retire from esports in 2020 after accusations of improper behaviour.

While still a male dominated scene, there is a marked increase in the role of women as a part of the Dota 2 scene and the International. Aitchinson and van der Hejden's roles have both expanded, and they are no longer the only important women to appear in the International broadcast. Zhang ”Dove” Tiange and Kang ”Eve” Zhexi also appear in videos, often with Aitchinson and Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner, and there are incidental appearances by people who just happen to be a part of the Dota 2 scene. The person chosen to represent Australian Dota 2 scene in ”Australian Dota” is Steph ”Anuxi” Everett, a female community artist. Even if women are a minority in the

Dota 2 scene, they are shown to be a part of it regardless, and they can fulfill any role within the scene even if there are no professional players present. Aitchinson and Kanner have almost identical roles as comedic hosts, and if anything, Aitchinson's responsibilities as a part of the production team are larger than Kanner's, as she still is the primary interviewer of teams in addition to her more comedic content, while Kanner's main role is creating comedic entertainment both in his hosting duties as well the videos he stars in.

As an event, the International has grown both in size and complexity from 2015 to 2019, and it has solidified both its professionalization as well as legitimization. It has become an institution, with an experienced production team, and professional teams where veterans are common. It has grown in size despite the diminished efforts at reaching out to outsiders. It is an event with global reach, with competitors coming from 30 nations in 2019, with players and teams from every major region of the world besides Africa, where a team based in the United States can both be represented by a group of immigrants as well as be willing to poke fun at those fans who question their legitimacy as a North American team due to this. At the end of Raising the Stakes, Taylor states she believes people within the esports scene are divided into amateurs, those participating in serious leisure, and finally professionals (246). In 2019, despite clear professionalization of the scene through the years, the tone of the event harkens back to the times when esports was less serious, with inside jokes, silly videos and a more casual tone, but it is all done by professionals, with comedic animations like *Snapfire* being the end result of a professional animation crew creating an animation with production values equal to an animated short by Pixar. There is an atmosphere of serious leisure, even if everyone involved is acting in a professional capacity. There is no attempt at seeking legitimacy at the International 2019 – they already have it, so there is no need for it.

# 6. Conclusion

The Internationals show that the volatile esports scene can stabilize, with time, effort and the support of its fans, a game played as an esport can become a legitimized and professionalized institution in itself. There are only a few individual esports games that can boast a similar record, with Counter-Strike: Global Offensive being another Valve game with a similarly established esports scene, Dota 2's rival League of Legends and its system are the most watched single esports

to this day, and while any individual fighting game cannot challenge the top games in viewer numbers or players, as a *genre* of esports they are successful, with plenty of well established events typically hosting several different individual games. Starcraft and its sequel used to be the first serious esport, but they have mostly disappeared from the eye of the global esports community, albeit Starcraft remains an important game to this day within South Korea, it is just its global reach that has diminished. There are of course plenty of esports scenes that attempt to be as established and legitimized as the ones listed above, with varying degrees of success, but a game rising above the rest and successfully legitimizing itself as a professional esport is rare. To understand better why most attempts fail and why some succeed, more comparative studies would be needed.

International is the main event of the Dota 2 competitive scene, and it is also possible it is directly inspiring productions of lesser events within the scene. As I was writing this thesis, near the end, I was also following the final weeks of the second season of 2021's DPC league, and noticed some similarities to choices made at the International 2019's matches presentation and those made by the EU DPC league's production. Specifically the playercameras being present as part of the broadcast were a part of the show, placed in an identical position to the ones present at the International 2019. How much do choices made by major events influence lesser events in the esports scene is a potential avenue of further research, examining cases where esports games influence each other as well as major events within a scene influencing lesser events are both possible.

There is also an interesting note to be said about the stability of the *scene* versus the stability of the *game* – Internationals are an institution, with a massive event each year, and there are predictable elements to each by this point, it will have so and so many teams, a larger prizepool than last year, returning veterans, casters and hosts and so on, but at the same time it keeps adapting and changing. 2015 to 2019 is very different in what kind of content is shown to the viewers, and the game itself has also changed, with Dota 2 getting frequent balance changes to the game as well, sometimes changing rather large features of the game even. Dota 2's main competitor, League of Legends, also has frequent balance changes to its cast of characters, and also has a stable and established scene – is there a link between an esport constantly evolving and changing and remaining popular? This is a fairly stark contrast to traditional sports, where the rules

change rarely, if ever. This thesis did not go into detail on the early Internationals, or the ones between the fifth and the ninth – by expanding the scope, could it be possible to pinpoint when exactly did Dota 2 become a professionalized and legitimized esport? By looking at every single International from the first to ninth? The fifth International did already seem like it had become so, but there was a surprising amount of changes from 2015 to 2019. As I begun to write this, I did not expect to find as many differences as I did.

By this point in time, esports as a phenomenon has stabilized, and there are individual games and scenes that have become professionalized and legitimized to varying degrees, such as Dota 2's Internationals, but more research needs to be done. The instability of esports means much historical data has been lost, with early esports rarely bothering to record the successes and failures of itself, but today there are websites such as Liquipedia that gathers information on tournaments, players and other esports statistics, marketing analysts such as Newzoo that look into the business side of esports, and veterans that have been active in the scene for decades that researchers are able to interview like seen in the presence of longtime veterans at both Internationals I examined. In addition to improved amounts of data, we also have several esports games and events that we can point to as established institutions like the Internationals, and several whose failures we can examine. I believe this thesis shows that the Internationals have gone through professionalization and legitimization, and that perhaps it could be examined which games, events and other elements of esports are going through institutionalization. There is also the curious trajectory from a more serious looking production to a less serious one with more casualness and humor even as production quality is more advanced when comparing 2015 and 2019's International, and I find that interesting – is this transformation into a more casual tone even as the professionalization and legitimization stabilizes an universal trend or something specific to Dota 2, or even just the Internationals? I believe this question is something that a future study could look at, to better help us understand the evolution of esports.

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# Appendix

### Links to the supplementary videos, player and team profiles, stream VODs, Liquipedia

## International 5 content

**This is Dota-video:**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cp8neRiF9-k
DESCRIPTION:
Video introducing the basic concepts of Dota 2, published on 4.8.2015
**Dota 2 roles-videos:**
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7CoR71Vapo&list=PLxkyNsoBqOdBGfqZNbJwcz5UiL7rhrk3h
DESCRIPTION:
Playlist with all the videos explaining the five basic player roles of Dota 2, published on 3-8.8.2015
Newcomer stream VOD (19:30 to 53:50)

http://www.twitch.tv/dota2ti_newcomer/v/9560771

DESCRIPTION:

Link to the VOD of day 1 of newcomer stream

**English main stream day 1 (00:00:00 – 01:40:00 and 3:00:00 – 3:10:00)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VUW9emA4Kao

DESCRIPTION:

The opening of the International 2015, and Jeremy Lin on panel, published on 3.8.2015

**English main stream day 2 (00:00:00 – 1:00:00)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=75IDMrTkwJc

DESCRIPTION:

Coverage of day 2 at the International, published on 3.8.2015

**TI 5 Behind the Scenes with Bruno**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ymsawNx7Co

DESCRIPTION:

Video about behind the scenes at the International, published on 5.8.2015

**TI5 Player Profiles - N0tail - Cloud 9**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sO2T4JNHDI0

DESCRIPTION:

Player profile of Johan Sundstein. **NOTE:** N0tail player profile is the official title of the video, even though the ingame nickname of Johan Sundstein was BigDaddyN0tail at the time. Published on 27.7.2015 (before the Main event begun)

**TI5 Player Profiles - XBOCT - Natus Vincere**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uqkAlVI15aI

DESCRIPTION:

Player profile of Alexander Dashkevich, published on 29.7.2015 (before the main event begun)

**TI5 Player Profiles - SumaiL - EG**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CoX_-eX2ByM

DESCRIPTION:

Player profile of Syed Sumail Hassan, published on 27.7.2015 (before the main event begun)

**TI5 Player Profiles – fng – Virtus Pro**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N2lbJkGiHdY

DESCRIPTION:

Player profile of Artsiom “fng” Barshak, published on 29.7.2015 (before the main event begun)

**TI5 Team Empire**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ocy3Fbgm0SY

DESCRIPTION:

Team profile video of Team Empire, published on 6.8.2015

**TI5 Team LGD**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y_56QxlZnt8

DESCRIPTION:

Team profile video of LGD-Gaming, published on 11.8.2015 **NOTE:** Was shown on stream, was just uploaded after the event to the Youtube-channel.

**Liquipedia's 2015 International coverage**

https://liquipedia.net/dota2/The_International/2015

DESCRIPTION:

Liquipedia's collected article on the International 2015, including the teams, players, analysts, commentators and various statistics

## International 2019 content

**International 2019 Day One (00:00:00 to 02:00:00)**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WiaZDcIgkmw

DESCRIPTION:

Day one of the International 2019 coverage, special focus on the opening ceremony

**International 2019 Day Three Rerun (00:00:00 to 01:00:00)**

https://www.twitch.tv/videos/470996714

DESCRIPTION:

Day three of the International 2019 coverage, twitch VOD is used as for unknown reasons Day 3 is not available on the official Youtube-channel

**Australian Dota**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V8F_VHqIdyQ

DESCRIPTION:

Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner showcases Australian Dota with  Steph ”Anuxi” Everett

**An OG Vacation**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w8Mho8b7dpA

DESCRIPTION:

Team OG on vacation after winning the International 2018

**Alliance**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QV0-HzY7te8

DESCRIPTION:

A video showcasing team Alliance

**Secret vs. Infamous**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h_6JvWe-CKg

DESCRIPTION:

Match between Secret vs. Infamous, special attention paid to the UI elements during the first thirty minutes

**Fnatic vs. Liquid**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VHxKlGBYiUY

DESCRIPTION:

Match between Fnatic and Liquid, special attention paid to the UI elements during the pick and ban phase

**Changsa Tour with Dove**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rlRC76VTqWM

DESCRIPTION:

Zhang ”Dove” Tiange goes on tour of Changsa with several veteran Chinese players

**Dumpling Show**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ya5qRkQoKio

DESCRIPTION:

Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner, Kaci Aitchinson, Zhang ”Dove” Tiange and Kang ”Eve” Zhexi fool around in the kitchen making dumplings and spoiled pizza rolls

**Dota Stories from GL and Mumu – International 2019**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cio7anZxZfQ

DESCRIPTION:

Highlight on Chinese Community artists

**Tea with Dove**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6nc5gFcujBo

DESCRIPTION:

Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner, Kaci Aitchinson and Zhang ”Dove” Tiange have tea and chat

**Old Boys of Chinese Dota**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eZjOC9-SPSg

DESCRIPTION:

Multiple veterans of Chinese Dota speak of how they are still active in the scene

**Dota Dads**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O3jLxj6Ojy8

DESCRIPTION:

Veteran Dota 2 players with families in spotlight

**Late Game Day 1 [EN]**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvtvW0-huqY

DESCRIPTION:

An after event show in the vein of talkshows broadcasted live after day one was over

**Looking Spicy – Alliance**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R8ZE6NDFvoo

DESCRIPTION:

Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner interviews Alliance in the style of *Hot Ones* series on Youtube

**Looking Spicy – ODPixel and Fogged**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ybNX-hzhgH4

DESCRIPTION:

Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner interviews two casters in the style of *Hot Ones* series on Youtube

**Kaci and s4 massage**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9HivtKGHyow

DESCRIPTION:

Kaci Aitchinson interviews a pro player while both get a massage

**Dust of Appearance – Vici Gaming**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LRSQyrlrP7I

DESCRIPTION:

A skit video starring International 9 team Vici Gaming

**Shanghai tour**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gR81vKXgJGc

DESCRIPTION:

Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner, Kaci Aitchinson, Zhang ”Dove” Tiange and Kang ”Eve” Zhexi tour Shanghai

**Kaci and Jake's Mandarin Lessons**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rwa3Vx056S0

DESCRIPTION:

Jake ”SirActionSlacks” Kanner and Kaci Aitchinson participate in a lesson on Mandarin

**Dust of Appearance – Evil Geniuses**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7K6lzyxb140

DESCRIPTION:

A skit video starring International 9 team Evil Geniuses

**Dota 2 – Snapfire**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DXBpMy9VgNU

DESCRIPTION:

Animated short about the new Dota 2 character Snapfire

**Dota 2 – Void Spirit**

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xLK-h3TB2ds

DESCRIPTION:

A mixture of an animated short and live hologram show introducing the new Dota 2 character Void Spirit

**Liquipedia's coverage of the 2019 International**

https://liquipedia.net/dota2/The_International/2019

DESCRIPTION:

Liquipedia's collected article on the International 2019, including the teams, players, analysts, commentators and various statistics